THE EXTRA MAN

by
Richard Greenberg

Writer's Representative:
George P. Lane
Creative Artists Agency
162 Fifth Avenue, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10010
Phone: 212-277-9000
Fax: 212-277-9099

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CHARACTERS:

KEITH
LAURA
JESS
DANIEL

SETTINGS:

ACT ONE

Scene 1: An empty apartment.
Scene 2: The kitchen of Laura and Daniel's apartment.
Scene 3: Laura and Daniel's bedroom.
Scene 4: A city bench.
Scene 5: A restaurant.
Scene 6: A restaurant.
Scene 7: A bench on a city street.
Scene 8: A street and Jess's apartment.
Scene 9: An empty apartment.
Scene 10: The same empty apartment.

ACT TWO

Scene 1: A bench.
Scene 2: Jess's bedroom.
Scene 3: A restaurant.
Scene 4: Laura and Daniel's bedroom.
Scene 5: A restaurant.
Scene 6: Laura and Daniel's bedroom.
Scene 7: Jess's bedroom.
Scene 8: Laura and Daniel's kitchen.

The Extra Man, by Richard Greenberg, was first performed at South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa, California; opening on October 25, 1991.

Directed by	Michael Engler
Sets by	Philipp Jung
Costumes by	Candice Donnelly
Lighting by	Peter Maradudin
Music and Sound by	Michael Roth
Stage Manager	Julie Haber

CAST:

KEITH	Peter Frechette
LAURA	Kandis Chappell
JESS	Kario Salem
DANIEL	Jonathan Emerson

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

(An empty apartment. Day. KEITH and LAURA inspect the room. A moment.)

LAURA

Well, what do you think?

KEITH

It's certainly nice.

LAURA

There's a fireplace. And I love the view.

KEITH

I'm not crazy about the bathroom fixtures, all that onyx –

LAURA

It's inevitable, though.

KEITH

I suppose...Do you think the realtor-lady –

LAURA

Mrs. Warren.

KEITH

Yes. Do you think she's offended that we asked to do this without her?

LAURA

She knows you're a writer.

KEITH

So?

LAURA

I told her you have special needs.

KEITH

And she bought it?

LAURA

I don't know. I just hate when they're breathing down your neck——

KEITH

But still——

LAURA

She waits in a bar, she gets to drink, she's fine...The floor's new.

KEITH

Uh huh...it's a beautiful grain.

LAURA

But it's not you.

KEITH

Well...

LAURA

Well, then, what is? Who are you anyway? Have we met?

KEITH

Excuse me?

LAURA

No one else I know can afford to do this; I want to find you a place and decorate it and then bring people to it and make them think it's mine.

KEITH

You have a great place.

LAURA

That 's only because Daniel's been living there since the death of Pliny the Elder or something; it's not as if we can do anything with it.

KEITH

Either way...I think it's the idea of decorating that keeps me from getting a place. Lois and Peter just got their couch last week, you know. They ordered it, when, April? And after all this time, it finally arrives, and it's in pieces in a box.

LAURA

No.

KEITH

Yes. A couch kit.

LAURA

When are you putting it together for them?

KEITH

Tomorrow morning.

(She gives him a look.)

Well, I can't just let them suffer, they're friends.

LAURA

Keith---

KEITH

Oh, it isn't as if Buchner decided to take a sabbatical in his early twenties, there aren't any unwritten masterpieces dying on the vine here.

LAURA

I want someone fun to work with again.

KEITH

Isn't there anyone fun these days?

LAURA

Nothings fun these days.

(Beat.)

KEITH

(Sits with her in windowsill. She takes his arm. Pause.)
Do you want me to come to your apartment and do all your housework for you?
(She laughs.)
I would if you'd like.
(She's still laughing.)
What?

LAURA

I find it depressing to think of what a good person you are.

KEITH

All the people we know are good people.

LAURA

You see, you even believe that.

KEITH

It's true.

LAURA

But you're better. That's why you have such terrible friends.
(Crossing to fireplace.)
The fireplace is the original marble, you don't find that very often ---

KEITH

I have wonderful friends.

LAURA

Some.

KEITH

And the others?

LAURA

The others are purgatory.

KEITH

Like who?

LAURA

I don't want to say.

KEITH

Who?

(Beat.)

LAURA

Well. Randy, to state the obvious.

KEITH

He's a lovely person.

LAURA

He's a cretin.

KEITH

I know he can be difficult.

LAURA

He's a thief; he steals things at parties.

(Beat.)

KEITH

What?

LAURA

He takes things. Whenever I invite him--which I only do because of you--he pilfers something. An ashtray or a picture or somebody's watch.

KEITH

My God! Why don't you say something?

LAURA

I do. I call him the next morning and I say, "Randy, you idiot, give me back that goddamn whatever-it-is-this-time or I'm calling the cops."

KEITH

And he does?

LAURA

Yes.

KEITH

Well, there you are.

LAURA

But still he takes things--that he takes them in the first place--Also you can't say anything to him without his singing you some dire musical comedy selection in return, in this incredibly booming, flat--why are you friends?

KEITH

I'm his only friend.

LAURA

...Exactly, just my point. Oh, by the way, we're having a party next week.

KEITH

Are you asking Randy?

LAURA

Of course.

KEITH

Why don't you not?

LAURA

It's not possible.

KEITH

Why?

LAURA

Because of you.

KEITH

God, that's terrible.

LAURA

No it's not--it's just the fact--we're all knit up in each other.

KEITH

I've inflicted this horrible person on you.

LAURA

It's not much of a sacrifice.

(She puts her head on his shoulder. A moment. He rises, walks a little away from her.)

So, who are you going to bring to my party?

KEITH

Oh, please.

LAURA

Well, then why don't you bring Catherine.

KEITH

No, thank you.

LAURA

I want to meet her.

KEITH

I swear you've met her---

LAURA

I know, I know, you always say so, at some publication party when I hardly knew you, but I have no memory of it---

KEITH

Even so.

LAURA

I mean, you still see her, it's unnatural that I haven't --

KEITH

I see her once a year.

LAURA

Really?

KEITH

If that.

LAURA

I thought more.

KEITH

I can't more. I'm too angry.

LAURA

Still?

KEITH

She said she left me for my own good.

LAURA

That one.

KEITH

It's like being thrown out a window by someone who tells you the fresh air will do wonders for you.

LAURA

It's unbelievable she left. I think...to be loved like that by you...must have been...

KEITH

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah...

(Beat.)

LAURA

So this place, we're thinking no?

KEITH

What about your husband?

LAURA

What about my husband?

KEITH

Will he be participating in this shindig?

LAURA

Of course he'll be there.

KEITH

That wasn't my question.

LAURA

Oh.

(Sighs.)

Well. Daniel...Well...

KEITH

I don't believe things are that bad.

LAURA

They're not; it's just...He has a terrible life, you know.

KEITH

He can't; he has you.

LAURA

And that's only the beginning.

(They laugh.)

His work is....

KEITH

He's a big sexy lawyer; his work's fantastic.

LAURA

His cases...these days...He comes home, he tells me these stories...every one more atrocious than the last. I just...listen. What can I say? What can I possibly say? Yes, I understand? I don't understand. I sit there...at a loss...even platitudes fail me...So I dredge up the most horrific thing that's crossed my path recently...It's never horrific enough...I sit there feeling unspeakably shallow for not having anything worse than your standard-issue urban malaise to offer. My little story of despair, whatever I've dredged up falls flat. We hem and haw some more, no fighting, nothing bitter - just, somehow...the death of rapport. I finish brushing my hair and we go to bed.

KEITH

Do you have sex?

(Beat.)

LAURA

Sometimes.

KEITH

I can't believe I said that.

LAURA

You did.

KEITH

I should be slapped.

LAURA

It's all right.

(Beat.)

KEITH

You do love him, don't you?

LAURA

I love him deeply. He's just not anyone I can have a conversation with.

(Beat.)

KEITH

I want to make you happy.

LAURA

You do.

KEITH

That's not what I mean.

LAURA

Then write me another book.

KEITH

I mean, now--right now--in the moment--I want to make you smile.

LAURA

Oh. Well.

(Beat.)

KEITH

There's something I could tell you...no, I can't.

LAURA

What?

KEITH

I can't; I swore I wouldn't.

LAURA

Well, now you have to.

KEITH

Why?

LAURA

Because you brought it up.

(Beat.)

KEITH

I really shouldn't tell you this---

LAURA

Keith---

KEITH

Jess told me he thinks you 're the most beautiful woman he's ever known.

(Pause.)

LAURA

What?

KEITH

I shouldn't have told you.

LAURA

Jess?

KEITH

It was in strictest confidence.

LAURA

But Jess is Daniel's friend more than mine. Jess belongs to Daniel.

KEITH

We're all friends. Oh God, is he one of the ones you hate?

LAURA

No, of course not, Jess is...adorable. I mean, I like Jess, but...When did he say that?

KEITH

A few days ago.

LAURA

Why?

KEITH

I don't remember; it came up.

LAURA

That's sweet.

KEITH

You can't tell anyone I told you.

LAURA

I wouldn't.

KEITH

I only told you so you'd smile.
(She smiles, kisses him, he pulls away gently.)
Now I really have to see you get back to work.

LAURA

Mrs. Warren will start charging us rent.
(Beat.)
Thank you.

KEITH

For what?

LAURA

For listening. And for telling.

KEITH

Oh.

LAURA

It's a silly thing, but it's nice to know.

KEITH

Any time...Let's go.

LAURA

What are you doing the rest of the day?

KEITH

Laundry.

Fade out.
End of Scene.

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

(The Kitchen of LAURA'S apartment. LAURA is putting food on a plate. JESS enters.)

JESS

Not that I don't love you, but your party makes me want to open a vein.

LAURA

Jess---

JESS

Do you know what's going on out there?

LAURA

I---

JESS

Okay. In the middle of the room, Paula Ellenbogen is holding forth on the topic of her recent dental surgery and displaying to anyone who'll take her up on it what she calls , "the gaping hole in my lower mandible."

LAURA

She's---

JESS

Randy is following Keith around the room, singing the overture to "Candide" or something into his ear--directly into his ear. And when people look at Keith as if to suggest that this is, maybe, well, weird...disturbing...painful, he just looks back at them with this--is it forbearing or proud?--smile and continues whatever conversation he's engaged in as if nothing's happening. Meanwhile over by the pigs-in-the-blanket, appropriately enough, there is a pseudo-Marxist, dilettante, would-be documentary filmmaker who keeps pointing at me, no I swear it, and telling anyone who'll listen probably stuff like my latest piece in FilmStream is the tritest, most obvious, complacent piece of mainstream crap he's ever had the misfortune to read but don't bother to attack me for it, I'm too stupid to be attacked, I should just be pitied and laughed at. I mean, was this a campaign on your part to destroy my peace-of-mind? Do you hate me for some reason? Is this just the inevitable outcome of any gathering these days? Would you like to say something? Should I yield for an interjection?

LAURA

Randy isn't really singing the overture to "Candide" into Keith's ear, is he?

JESS

He absolutely is.

LAURA

You're kidding--why?

JESS

I don't know; lover's thing?

LAURA

They're not lovers. Keith isn't constructed that way.

JESS

Randy is, though, isn't he?

LAURA

I guess--who can ever tell?

JESS

Unrequited lover's thing, then. Your husband's very cute. He keeps following them around, saying:

(This should be very accurate.)

"Are you...Is this...are you... ummm...?"

LAURA

(laughing)

Stop.

JESS

"I uh...I ...umm...is this...umm....should you....ummm..."

LAURA

(laughing harder)

Stop.

JESS

"I was just wondering...if...umm...Keith, it's...it's...it's...it's-uh....it's-uh....it's-uh....it's-uh....."

LAURA

(laughing still harder)

Stop.

(He stops.)

Go on.

JESS

That's all.

LAURA

You're finished?

JESS
Well, he never finishes, so I guess I am.

LAURA
Poor Daniel.

JESS
He's the only sweet thing happening out there. Is this offensive, should I pretend to be enjoying myself?

LAURA
Yes.

JESS
...God, I'm a creep!

LAURA
Yes.
(She smiles at him, then turns back to arranging the hors-d'oeuvre. When she does this, she runs a hand through her hair, replacing a fallen strand behind her ear, in a way that is just slightly self-consciously attractive, and for JESS's benefit.)
What article?

JESS
What?

LAURA
I haven't seen your article--what is it?

JESS
Oh, please skip it--it's total crap.

LAURA
Of course it isn't--what's it on?

JESS
It's on--promise you won't laugh--the abuse of holocaust imagery in contemporary American movies.

LAURA
Oh.

JESS
I call it, "The Evil of Banality."
(She smiles slightly.)
You hate it.

LAURA

No.

JESS

You think it's an unforgivable, an unpardonable joke, right? I'm trivializing the holocaust and Hannah Arendt.

LAURA

Not at all.

JESS

Then, what?

LAURA

Nothing
(Beat.)
It's been used though, hasn't it?

JESS

...What?

LAURA

Maybe not.

JESS

Oh, God.

LAURA

Maybe not.

JESS

Do you have any cyanide?

LAURA

Sorry.

JESS

This god-damned party!

(KEITH enters, carrying a coffee pot and rubbing his ear.)

KEITH

It's going well...Am I interrupting something?

LAURA

Not at all.

KEITH

Oh good, you'd made more coffee.

(He starts decanting from the pot into the one he's carrying.)

JESS

What's happening out there--is the room safe for human habitation?

KEITH

Yes--it's wonderful--they've made a party game out of Paula Ellenbogen's mouth. Everybody's trying to come up with a metaphor for it--I said, the La Brea tar pits--I got a very low score--is this decaf?

LAURA

No.

KEITH

Don't worry, I'll make some.

(He washes out empty coffee pot, replaces it, etc.)

JESS

How does Paula Ellenbogen feel about her dental tragedy being made light of like that?

KEITH

I think she enjoys it--here's the decaf--it puts her worse tragedy out of mind.

LAURA

What worse tragedy?

KEITH

With Ted.

LAURA

What with Ted?

KEITH

Oh, come on.

JESS

What?

KEITH

I don't believe it.

JESS

What don't you believe?

KEITH

Ted and this woman, this technical writer.

LAURA

Ted and some technical writer?

KEITH

I know you know this.

JESS

Ted is porking some technical writer?

KEITH

Oh God, I hope not--what does that mean.

LAURA

Is that true?

KEITH

You've known this for weeks.

LAURA

It's been going on for weeks?

KEITH

Well, days. Two days.

LAURA

Ted Ellenbogen, what, ran off with this technical writer two days ago?

KEITH

Or she may be a lab technician.

LAURA

Wait--Paula Ellenbogen's husband left her for a technical writer or lab technician two days ago, and at this moment , Paula is standing in the middle of my party listening to people's attempt to say humorous things about her mouth?

KEITH

Yes.

LAURA

That doesn't seem....nice, somehow.

KEITH

Oh, no, it's the best thing for her -- really, she's eating it up.

LAURA

She's eating it up?

KEITH

Well, I mean, she has no teeth---

LAURA

God!

KEITH

Oh, no, look, don't get all upset---Just next time you see her tell her when she smiles it looks like the Black Hole of Calcutta or something and she'll be happy as a clam.

(DANIEL enters, good-natured, speechless, bemused, and shaking his head.)

DANIEL

It's...it's really, have you seen --

JESS

Daniel.

DANIEL

Paula's been - Randy's --
(To JESS)
So, you're just, what, hiding or - or --

JESS

I'm a guest; I don't have to suffer --

DANIEL

That's, that's - Well, lucky you.

LAURA

(Handing him plate.)
Here, take these.

DANIEL

Oh God, back to the...back to the...

JESS

You're a very brave man.

DANIEL

Yeah.
(He exits.)

KEITH

He's really having a much better time than that.

LAURA

I should be with him.

KEITH

Listen, I'll go...I have to bring the coffee, anyway. Just watch for the decaf. Daniel's fine, he's having a wonderful time...in his own way.

(He exits.)

JESS

...I should have rescued Daniel.

LAURA

Why?

JESS

He's my friend.

LAURA

Keith likes to.

JESS

I know, but still.

(Beat.)

LAURA

Paula.

JESS

Yeah.

(Beat.)

LAURA

So...how are you really?

JESS

I'm writing all these pieces.
(Beat. Defeated.)
Hmm. Well....
(Beat.)
Oh, screw it, might as well go back to the party.

LAURA

(To stop him.)
Maybe we should do a collection.

JESS

What?

LAURA

Doesn't that sound fun?

JESS

Of what I write?

LAURA

Trade paperback.

JESS

Do you have that kind of power?

LAURA

I can suggest it; I'm taken more or less seriously.

JESS

That will stop if you suggest it.

LAURA

I love your stuff.

JESS

Great. Sure. Fine. We can call the whole collection, "The Evil of Banality." "The Evil of Banality: A Case in Point."

LAURA

Stop.

JESS

It would be an excuse to have lunch together, anyway.

LAURA

Haven't we?

JESS

No.

LAURA

So let's.

JESS

That would be amazing.

LAURA

It's no big deal.

JESS

In my life? When?

LAURA

...Umm...

JESS

I'm free always. My schedule is clear till death.

(Beat.)

LAURA

I'm busy next week.

JESS

The week after, then?

LAURA

...Sure. Why not?

JESS

What day?

(Beat.)

LAURA

Let's decide top of the week.

JESS

Okay. But let's, okay? Let's really?

LAURA

Absolutely.

(Beat. JESS takes plate she's been removing canapes from, starts washing it.)

You don't have to do that; Keith will do it..

JESS

You mean Daniel.

LAURA

No, Keith.

(Beat.)

I guess we really ought to go out there and say something to Paula about her mouth.

JESS

Wait!

LAURA

What?

JESS

We have to wait for the decaf, don't we?

LAURA

Oh, the decaf.

(She smiles; he smiles back at her. Beat.)

Fade out.

End of Scene.

ACT ONE, SCENE THREE

(LAURA's and DANIEL's bedroom. LAURA is in her robe at her dressing table, combing out her hair. DANIEL enters after a moment. He is wearing socks, but no shoes. LAURA looks over her shoulder at him, smiles; he smiles back, yawns.)

LAURA

(Almost too quietly to hear.)
Exhaust.

DANIEL

...Huh?

LAURA

I said, "exhaust." I mean, "exhausted."

DANIEL

...You are?

LAURA

...Umm..either way.

(Beat.)

DANIEL

Yeah.

(They look at each other a little more.)

DANIEL

(Looking down at his feet.)
Have you seen my shoes?

LAURA

Your shoes?

DANIEL

Yes.

LAURA

No.

DANIEL

Oh.
(Beat.)
I think he has a crush on you.

LAURA

No. Who?

DANIEL

Keith.

LAURA

Keith?

DANIEL

Yes.

LAURA

Don't be...of course he doesn't.

DANIEL

I don't...I don't mind. I just...

LAURA

He couldn't possibly; we're friends.

DANIEL

He talks about you. All the time.

LAURA

What does he say?

DANIEL

What you eat.

LAURA

Umm...?

DANIEL

He discusses things you eat.

LAURA

Like what?

DANIEL

Umm...Onions.

LAURA

I don't eat onions.

DANIEL

He says that.

LAURA

He says, I don't eat onions?

DANIEL

To a group of people. "Laura doesn't eat onions; they make her sick."
(Beat.)

LAURA

In what context?

DANIEL

I was just passing.
(Beat.)
I don't mind.
(Beat.)
I trust him.
(Beat.)
I'm sorry I'm such a...dodo with your friends.

LAURA

They're our friends.

DANIEL

I'm sorry I'm such a dodo with our friends.

LAURA

You're not.

DANIEL

(Looks down at his feet.)
I want to take off my shoes, but I'm not wearing any. Is it getting darker in here?

LAURA

It's night.

DANIEL

Darker than it used to?

LAURA

...No, it's dark the same.

DANIEL

I was thinking, the walls were getting...dirtier.

LAURA

Sebastiana's very good.

DANIEL

Sebastiana?

LAURA

She cleans for us?

DANIEL

Oh!...Well, that's not, that wouldn't be her...purview, quite, exactly, anyway, would it, oh damn, I'll just take off my socks.

(He does.)

LAURA

Think back.

DANIEL

To...?

LAURA

When you were wearing shoes.

(Beat.)

DANIEL

Why?

LAURA

You might remember where you took them off.

DANIEL

By the big chair.

(Beat.)

LAURA

Oh! You remember that?

DANIEL

Of course...Should I not?

LAURA

No, I just thought that you---

DANIEL

I left them there. I'd been standing a long time, my feet hurt, I took the shoes off by the big chair and left them there. I didn't move them. But they're gone.

(Beat.)

LAURA

Oh.

DANIEL

Maybe they just...walked off.

LAURA

I'm sure you'll find them---

DANIEL

(His little joke.)
I mean, they're shoes.

LAURA

You'll find them tomorrow.

DANIEL

Do you promise?

LAURA

Yes.

(Beat.)

DANIEL

It's...weird, though.
(She's combing her hair again.)
Well.
(Beat. He sits for a while, just looking at her; she doesn't notice at first, catches sight of him in the mirror.)
I'm sorry I don't have anything to say to them.

LAURA

You do.

DANIEL

Name something.
(Pause.)
It's..they're all so...serious and...hectic. Are they...are they doing important things?

LAURA

...No.

DANIEL

I should...I should just try to muster, to work up some conversation, but...I'm not, I can be, I'm very...articulate in court.

LAURA

I know, I've seen you.

DANIEL

Not lately.
(Beat.)
I can be. Honest Injun.
(Beat. Sighs.)
Oh, well.

LAURA

...Randy took your shoes.

DANIEL

Huh?

LAURA

He'll bring them back tomorrow.

DANIEL

You saw him?

LAURA

No. But I know.

DANIEL

...He <u>does</u> that?

LAURA

It's something he does.

DANIEL

...He's not, you don't think he's going to <u>wear</u> them, do you?

LAURA

I have no idea.

DANIEL

I mean...Randy in your shoes...what an idea!

LAURA

You can't catch anything from them---

DANIEL

But still...is that <u>normal</u>? Is that the way people are?

LAURA

Randy isn't people.

DANIEL

Was he some sort of...I don't know...mad scientist thing, experiment they did in the fifties?

LAURA

He's Keith's friend.

DANIEL

...Well, that's that, then.

(Beat.)

LAURA

Tell me about your week.

(Beat. He sighs.)

DANIEL

This new case.

LAURA

You have a new case! What's it about?

DANIEL

This drug. These babies.

LAURA

Did bad things happen to the babies?

DANIEL

They, well, they...died.

LAURA

How many?

DANIEL

Thirty-eight.

LAURA

God!...How did it...What?

DANIEL

Oh, the...There was this drug for kids who had measles. It worked, but it caused...stomach, internal...you know...

LAURA

Sure...

DANIEL

...So they went straight to the manufacturer and asked, "can you make a version of this we can inject directly into the bloodstream?" He said,"Sure, no problem" and...

LAURA

So, no one...anything? The FDA, nobody?

DANIEL

Went right into use.

LAURA

God! I mean, God!

DANIEL

These children, these infants started...dying. There was a...trend of it; they started...investigating and, of course, this was the link.

(Pause.)

I've been meeting with some of the, some of the...parents.

LAURA

They must be...

DANIEL

Their children are dead. They had measles.

(Pause.)

The manufacturer...he thinks it's unfortunate, he doesn't understand...why the fuss.

(Beat.)

There's something...I don't get. Something I don't get.

LAURA

What?

DANIEL

(Smiles sadly, shrugs.)

(She looks at him. Pause.)

LAURA

...We finally found out why Walter Wilson has been such a nightmare lately.

DANIEL

...Huh?

LAURA

His lover has AIDS.

DANIEL

Oh, God, that's---

LAURA
I know. So we don't mind when he rants anymore.

DANIEL
Who's Walter Wilson?

(Beat.)

LAURA
He's an author.

DANIEL
One of yours?

(Beat.)

LAURA
No, he's...Bill Conover has him.

DANIEL
Oh.
(Beat.)
Have I met Bill Conover?

LAURA
I think you might have once...at a party.

(Beat.)

DANIEL
Is Walter Wilson a major writer?

LAURA
No.

DANIEL
Is he good?

LAURA
Fair.

DANIEL
...Have you ever met his lover?

(Beat.)

LAURA

No.

(Beat.)

DANIEL

It's awful, this...thing...everywhere you go, this...plague...just awful, I...

(Beat.)

LAURA

I'm calling Randy first thing tomorrow morning and demand he return those shoes.

DANIEL

I'd appreciate it; people just, they shouldn't steal your shoes.

LAURA

I'm going to say that.

(He crosses to her, stands behind her a moment, puts a hand on her head, smiles into the mirror, returns to the bed, starts to unbutton his shirt.)

It's just, really...

DANIEL

What?

LAURA

All those babies.

DANIEL

Yeah...

(He lies on the bed, still dressed, his body curling a little; his eyes wide open. She lays the brush on the dressing table.)

Fade out.

End of scene.

ACT ONE, SCENE FOUR

(A city bench. Afternoon. LAURA and KEITH drink coffee out of take-out cups.)

KEITH

...Who did you cancel to have lunch with me today?

LAURA

I didn't cancel anyone.

KEITH

I thought you had a full week.

LAURA

Not at all.

KEITH

I thought that's what you told me.

LAURA

Never.

KEITH

Oh, that's right, Jess told me.

(Beat.)

LAURA

That's what I told him.

KEITH

Why?

LAURA

He wanted to have lunch.

KEITH

That's great--why don't you?

LAURA

I will. Do you think Randy ever wore Daniel's shoes?

KEITH

No.

LAURA
Why do you say that? Did you ask him?

KEITH
He wouldn't. Is Daniel...concerned?

LAURA
He hasn't worn them since they came back.

KEITH
Maybe he can have them cleaned.

LAURA
It's not a matter of sanitation; it's more a spiritual thing.

KEITH
Maybe he can have them exorcised...So how are you and Daniel, anyway?

LAURA
Exquisitely polite.
(Pause. KEITH touches her hair.)
It's such a nice day, let's talk about other things.

KEITH
Absolutely...So what were you and Jess talking about at the party?

LAURA
Nothing.

KEITH
...Really?

LAURA
That he's depressed.

KEITH
Uh-huh--and what else?

LAURA
Nothing--what are you asking?

KEITH
Nothing. Why don't you want to have lunch with him?

LAURA
Well I do...It's just...I suggested we publish a collection of his pieces.

KEITH

That's a brilliant idea!

LAURA

Is it?

KEITH

Jess is the best writer on film this country has produced since James Agee.
(Beat.)

LAURA

...Jess?

KEITH

What--you don't like Jess's writing?

LAURA

I have no idea--I've never read a word of it.

KEITH

Jesus.

LAURA

That's what I thought after I suggested the collection.

KEITH

Why haven't you read any---?

LAURA

I don't know--I have so much to read, you know, it's my job---

KEITH

But Jess is a friend--

LAURA

Well, they're all my friends--I have many friends--Anyway, I mean, film?

KEITH

But when Jess writes about it, it isn't just film--the films are just a kind of...launching pad. He touches on everything...And his prose is...phenomenal, gorgeous; it sparkles; you read it and think, "Why bother ever writing another sentence?"

LAURA

Jess?

KEITH

You really have to read him---

LAURA

Well, I will--Daniel always said he was wonderful, but Daniel's a lawyer---

KEITH

Jess is one of those people who suddenly they're fifty years old and they're everywhere and people ask where they came from and it turns out they were there the whole time only nobody noticed. Only you can...speed things along--he's extraordinary, Laura, he really is --I really can't believe you never read him before...

LAURA

No...it's just...film criticism....

KEITH

Then why did you say you wanted to do it in the first place?

LAURA

I don't know, I don't have a clue.

(Pause.)

Because I wanted to keep him in the room...because he thinks I'm pretty.

(Pause. KEITH smiles.)

KEITH

You can't tell him you've changed your mind.

LAURA

I wasn't going to do that...I was just never going to bring it up again until he forgot.

KEITH

He won't forget---

LAURA

I think---

KEITH

Trust me.

(Beat.)

LAURA

He's spoken to you about it.

KEITH

Just trust me.

LAURA

...What did he say?

KEITH

Laura...be careful with Jess.

LAURA

...I don't know what...

KEITH

(With feeling.)
He's not just...anyone, you know? He's a wonderful person...and things have been very hard for him lately. He's forgotten almost everything good about himself...Any little hope is likely to---

LAURA

Damn.

KEITH

No, it's good...but you can't take it away from him, it would be too cruel...especially from you. I don't ask you for many things.

LAURA

...Especially from me?

KEITH

Okay. Speech over. What else?

LAURA

Why especially from me?

KEITH

I didn't say anything.

LAURA

What has he said to you?

(Long, uncomfortable pause.)

KEITH

Nothing.

LAURA

You're not going to tell me.

KEITH

It's nothing---

LAURA

You're a terrible liar, I know there's something, why are you --

KEITH

Because it's completely silly, it's meaningless, but it will upset you.

LAURA

What?

(Jokingly.)

So--what--Jess has three months to live and his last wish is to have this book published.

KEITH

No.

LAURA

Okay, so he's, what---he's madly in love with me--what?

(Deep silence from KEITH. LAURA becomes aware of it.)

Oh, come on.

KEITH

Let's play another game, all right?

LAURA

You're joking.

(Silence.)

Don't do this - it's not funny.

KEITH

Oh Christ, can we just cancel the last few minutes---

LAURA

Has he --?

KEITH

You shouldn't know this.

LAURA

He's told you --

KEITH

I don't want to say anything else. I shouldn't have...oh, damn.

LAURA

If someone's in love with you, you can tell.

KEITH

Not always.

LAURA

Yes you can.
(Beat.)
Can't you?
(Beat.)
It's been such a long time.
(Beat.)
Wait...This is all crazy. It's absurd. It's as if we're talking about a stranger. Jess would never...fall in love with me.

KEITH

Why not?

LAURA

It's not...within his bounds.

KEITH

If you think that, then he is a stranger.

(Beat.)

LAURA

I've known him for years. I've known him longer than I've known you.

KEITH

But you don't know him. You don't...know him. I know what you think--You think--"Oh, Jess, isn't it cute how cute his cute anxieties are?" He's this sort of...running gag, isn't he?
(Beat.)
That's a show, Laura, that's what he puts out to make it bearable --People like Jess, the world is so hard for them, they should be given prizes for getting through the day---

LAURA

That's---

KEITH

They should be wreathed in laurel for brushing their teeth--no, when you read him you'll see--People like that-- they understand everything and it matters to no one. Really; what can it be like...what must it be like, to feel everything so acutely, so...freshly and...bitterly...and for nothing to come of it, never any...relief or reward. The world must seem...grotesque beyond belief...I mean, he hides in the movies,...as if someday there'll be a story, some story that will fit him, that will make him feel at home in the world. But it never comes. He needs someone... someone who can...link him to things, somehow...and you were there. If it had been anyone else, but it was you...so there was no resisting it.

LAURA

That is insane.

KEITH

God-- you say that and I think you don't know him and you don't know yourself, either.

LAURA

Keith---

KEITH

What's happened to you? When did you forget yourself? It makes me crazy-- To be everything you are...and not to know it. Who did this to you? How did it happen? If only I could show you to yourself...as you are.

(She looks at him, puts her hand tenderly to his cheek. She keeps it there a moment, then he puts his hand over it, holds it for a while, then gently removes it from his face.)

I've scared you, haven't I? I've said-- what I've said, God! I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to go on like that. And don't be scared. It will pass, believe me...it will pass as if it never even happened.

(Beat. She looks at him.)

And do the book.

LAURA

I don't think that's--

KEITH

It will be your best book in years. It would be a sin for something this silly to stop you.

LAURA

But---

KEITH

A sin. Oh Christ, look at the time, I'm late---

LAURA

You're leaving me now?

KEITH

I have to.

LAURA

Where are you going?

KEITH

Randy's.

LAURA

Randy's?

KEITH

Putting up shelves. I'll call you later.

Fade out.
End of scene.

ACT ONE. SCENE FIVE

(A restaurant. LAURA and JESS.)

JESS

This is very exciting.

LAURA

Well, there are no guarantees---

JESS

No, of course not--but, I never thought you'd be interested---

LAURA

Why not?

JESS

To tell the truth, I didn't think you ever read my stuff...

LAURA

...Oh, come on.

JESS

Well---

LAURA

You're a friend---

JESS

Still. Above and beyond.

LAURA

Actually, I've come to think of you as probably the best writer on film this country has produced since James Agee.

JESS

No!

LAURA

I do.

JESS

To tell you the truth--and this is just me--but to tell you the truth, I prefer his other writing to his film criticism.

LAURA

...Really?

JESS

What he did with Walker Evans, his screenplays, even...it's only me...In what ways do you find us similar? Because even though I don't really like his work, the comparison is, of course, tremendously flattering.

LAURA

...Any number of ways.

JESS

What ways specifically?

LAURA

I can't really say specifically.

JESS

Oh.

LAURA

(A confession; lightly.)
I've never really read his work.

JESS

Then why did you...?

LAURA

It seemed apt.

JESS

Oh.
(Beat.)
Of course it is.
(Beat.)
Although we're nothing alike.

LAURA

You should be drinking; it's on me.

JESS

I don't drink anymore--my liver.

LAURA

Is there something wrong with your liver?

JESS

Oh, well, you know, I'm sure...

LAURA
Has anyone told myou there's something wrong with your liver?

JESS
No.

LAURA
Then there probably isn't.

JESS
Oh, look, let's not talk about it. If we talk about it, tonight, with no one there to dial 911, I'll die of a cirrhosis attack or ---

LAURA
You think this way?

JESS
Essentially I'm agnostic, but I believe in the god of cheap irony. Let's change the subject, I've already put myself too much at risk. How big a printing?

LAURA
Obviously modest, but we don't even know if---

JESS
Oh, no, no, no, yes, yes, I know...

LAURA
I haven't even spoken to---

JESS
I'm sorry, of course, I'm sorry, I'm completely jumping the gun, it's just that...it would be such a great joke.

LAURA
How, a joke?

JESS
Well, you know, in my department I'm considered sort of suspect--I don't publish enough and when I do, they always think it's kind of...juvenile and...stupid. You see, they're all these old-fart Cahiers du Cinema types, and I come along and I don't embrace their theories and I don't seem to have any of my own, so I'm seen as kind of a marginal figure, really, kind of without a profile and untalented. Not the type to get special recognition at all--not at all.

(Beat.)

LAURA

Really?

JESS

Oh God, yes.

LAURA

Huh!

(Beat.)

JESS

I suppose that wasn't the best thing I could have told you--

LAURA

It's---

JESS

This is why I never went into sales. I'm making such a terrible impression, I wanted to make such a good one!

LAURA

Impression? I've known you for centuries.

JESS

Not this way.

LAURA

...What way do you mean?

(Pause. They look at each other.)

JESS

(Hopefully.)
...Which essays do you like best?

LAURA

Oh! Well--so far--I especially like the ones on Indian film.

JESS

Really?

LAURA

Yes.

JESS

Really?

LAURA

(Starting to mistrust this idea.)
...I...think so. Why?

JESS

God, I got flack for those...

LAURA

Did you?

JESS

Oh God, I thought the Society for the Preservation of Satiyajat Ray was going to throw me onto any available pyre---

LAURA

Why?

JESS

They thought it was--and there is no such society, by the way, I made it up--but they thought it was a combination of shallowness and heresy, but you agree with me about his films?

LAURA

I don't know.

JESS

You...?

LAURA

I don't know.

JESS

You don't---?

LAURA

I've never seen them. I've never seen one of them. I've never been even tempted. I just never have.

JESS

But---

LAURA

Please don't talk to me about films. I don't go to films. If we could work together on this book without discussing the films involved, I'd be very grateful. I don't like films. I don't know anything about films. I--God, I feel like such an idiot with you! Ask me about Margaret Drabble or, or, Brancusi, I could discuss them with you at some length, but, not films, just not films.

(Beat.)

JESS

Then why do you want to do the book?

(Pause. The possible answers to that question are simultaneously tantalizing and deeply disappointing to JESS.)

LAURA

Well. I just do. You must think I'm the biggest dodo of an editor--

JESS

I know you're not---

LAURA

You've found me out--I'm completely out of my depth here--it's one of the topics I know almost nothing about---

JESS

I know you're one of the best young editors around---

LAURA

(Blushing, if possible.)
No, not that...not best, not young, but...
(Sees him looking.)
What?

JESS

You looked so pretty just then.

LAURA

...Umm....

JESS

Then especially, I mean.
(Beat.)
I shouldn't have said that.

LAURA

Don't say that.

JESS

I'm an idiot---

LAURA

Oh, look, just let's---

JESS

I didn't say anything, I--um--

LAURA

Let's just strike it from the record---

JESS

Umm--

LAURA

We should order.

JESS

(Picking up menu.)
Oh, right.

LAURA

(Studying menu.)
What are you going to have?

JESS

(Scanning menu.)
Sex sometime in the foreseeable future, I hope.
(Bedazzled by his own awkwardness.)
What a really good joke!
(She laughs.)
But it is true, you know, you really do look....

(Pause. They stay with their menus.)

LAURA

(Simply.)
It doesn't really matter that I don't know what you're writing about all that well...Because I think your subject is just more-or-less...a sort of occasion for what you write. You touch...it seems to me you touch...more than just touch...on so many things. And it all kind of sparkles...I'm not doing this book because I like you--Not that I don't like you--I do, of course, very much, I always have. But it's always been partly at least because of your work. It's the same as you, there's no break, it's...delightful, like you, whatever, well...

JESS

(Softly.)
Thank you.

LAURA

And those other people--the ones you work with--your colleagues---well, isn't it usually true that the old guard is suspicious of people who aren't like them? Couldn't they be--aren't they probably just jealous of you? Because you're young

LAURA (Cont'd)
and fresh and have all sorts of life they don't?

(Beat.)

I know you're not the most secure person in the world, it's sweet, but couldn't that be the case? Isn't that a definite way of seeing the situation?

JESS
...I've wanted...for such a long time I haven't had and I've...wanted so much...

LAURA
What?

JESS
...Just a little serious attention.

(She takes his hand.)

Fade out
End of scene.

ACT ONE, SCENE SIX

(A restaurant. KEITH and JESS. JESS has just arrived.)

JESS

I'm sorry I'm so late -- I took a cab instead of the subway, my cab driver got into a fight with a gypsy cab driver, they're all armed these days, you know; it's a miracle I wasn't killed in the crossfire.

KEITH

They shot at each other?

JESS

No, but that was just dumb-luck. God, that would have been something, getting killed in a cab avoiding the sub ---

KEITH

I don't think that's how it works ---

JESS

Essentially, I'm agnostic, but I believe in the god of cheap irony ---

KEITH

Funny ---

JESS

(Contrite.)
Anyway, I'm sorry.

KEITH

(Warmly.)
No problem.

JESS

Look at you, you're sitting here, you're so calm, there's a fountain in a restaurant, you're just staring at it -- This must be an expensive restaurant with that fountain ---

KEITH

My neighborhood, my treat, I insist.

JESS

Thank God. Thank you. How are you?

KEITH

Great, terrific. Always the same.

JESS

What have you been doing?

KEITH
Have you ever read "Paphnutius" by Hroswitha?

JESS
God, no...

KEITH
She was a nun --- It was a play!

JESS
Uh-huh.

KEITH
I've been taking it up to the Cloisters and reading it on a bench there; it's just lovely.

JESS
(Positive.)
Wow!
(Has nothing else to say on the subject.)

(Beat.)

KEITH
Oh, I have a message for you...

JESS
What?

KEITH
Daniel wants you to call him.

JESS
...Oh...

KEITH
He said you haven't been returning his calls ---

JESS
I keep missing our lunch ---

KEITH
Your---?

JESS
We have a weekly ---

KEITH
You have a weekly lunch? How great! How many times have you missed it?

JESS
About...eight.

KEITH
Eight times?

JESS
About eight.

KEITH
You've missed eight weeks of lunches?

JESS
Yes.

KEITH
You've missed two months of lunches?

JESS
I've been ---

KEITH
Well, you've been busy with the book.

JESS
...Yes.

KEITH
You really haven't had much time for anyone else...How's it coming?

JESS
It's hard to say.

KEITH
Laura is enjoying it.

JESS
She is?

KEITH
Very much.

JESS
I don't know -- I'm thinking of giving the whole thing up.

KEITH
What? You can't -- it's such a wonderful project ---

JESS
She compared me to James Agee.

KEITH
She's right.

JESS
She's never read James Agee.

KEITH
And that's why you're giving it up ---?

JESS
The whole thing is just vanity. We spend too much time together. It's a mess.
What's "Spaezl?"
(From the menu. Beat.)

KEITH
I'm going to say something.

JESS
What?

KEITH
And don't get me wrong: I don't mean anything by it. There's no reason for you to feel guilty about Daniel.

JESS
Oh, I don't, really ---

KEITH
Eight weeks?

JESS
I ---

KEITH
I didn't say anything ---

JESS
It's really ---

KEITH
I was silent.

(They return to their menus.)

JESS

I feel guilty as hell.

KEITH

I know.

JESS

For weeks.

KEITH

I know.

JESS

Ever since you told me --

KEITH

I shouldn't have told you ---

JESS

No, I'm glad you did ---

KEITH

It was the worst thing I've ever done ---

JESS

I like knowing ---

KEITH

It was evil; she didn't want me to...You haven't ---?

JESS

No, of course not, anyway, please don't, it's not you, you were just trying to cheer me up, it worked, but... God!...She was always just...Daniel's wife.

(Beat.)

...She's so...beautiful, you know?

(Beat.)

And she loves me.

KEITH

She's said so?

JESS

Yes.

KEITH

(With great interest.)

Really?

JESS

Yes. To you.

KEITH

Oh.

JESS

Not to me. Not yet. Not to me.

KEITH

Oh.

(Beat.)

JESS

Of course nothing can come of it, but it's nice to ---

KEITH

It can't?

JESS

What?

KEITH

Can't it?

(Beat.)

JESS

I love Daniel.

KEITH

I love Daniel, too.
(Beat.)
What are you ordering?

JESS

I'm not sure yet.

KEITH

(Browsing the menu.)
The pork loin is wonderful...I just wish he weren't so neglectful.

JESS

Who?

KEITH

Don't get me wrong, I think Daniel is a truly wonderful person --

JESS

He's busy, he works very hard ---

KEITH

Oh, I know, and he's having a great time with this new case, by the way, but you can't overlook things for so long without causing damage ---

JESS

He's having -- I heard he was having a terrible time -- His work is an incredible drain on him ---

KEITH

Oh, no, he was very excited when we spoke ---

JESS

He does good things. He does good work.

KEITH

Absolutely. Absolutely he does. I would never take that away from him. He's a good person and he does good things.

(Beat. Menus.)

But don't you get irritated with people -- who use their goodness -- a kind of public goodness as a cover for private neglect? I mean, it's wonderful to be engaged, to help -- and, God, I do admire it and I don't do enough of it myself -- but then you come home and you have this marriage --- and, who am I, I've never been married -- but isn't that an investment, isn't that a consecration of some kind? No matter what else you do in the world, is it really excusable to be the cause of a marriage that has no warmth, no rapport, no conversation, no sex?

JESS

No sex?

KEITH

We should change the subject.

JESS

Laura doesn't tell me these things ---

KEITH

Oh, look, look, look...Things just happen, and it's tragedy -- you can't lay blame.

(Beat.)

Only, sometimes, when you know people truly well...you feel as if...maybe you can.

(Pause.)

JESS

Things are really that ---

KEITH

Oh, let's really, really, really change the subject...Oh! Have you seen Paula Ellenbogen's new teeth?

JESS

I wonder if ---

KEITH

They make her look like a beauty queen. I think it's absolutely lifted her spirits.

JESS

Keith ---

KEITH

I never answered your question!

JESS

My ---?

KEITH

Spaezl is dumplings.

Fade out
End of scene

ACT ONE, SCENE SEVEN

(A bench on a city street. Twilight. JESS and LAURA sit in silence for a moment.)

LAURA

...We haven't talked about the book at all this afternoon.

JESS

We haven't talked about the book in weeks.

LAURA

That's not true.

JESS

We're completely bilking your publisher. If this doesn't change, pretty soon the lunches will be on me. Although, with my table manners half the time the lunches already are on me. Ba-ding-bang-boom. Oy.

(Beat.)

Anyway, the book hasn't been the point in a while.

(Pause.)

LAURA

There's my bus.

JESS

Wait for the next one.

(She moves to go; he puts his hand over hers.)

Please.

(She stays there with him. Pause.)

LAURA

What are you thinking?

JESS

I haven't had sex in three years....

LAURA

Jess! God! Jess!

JESS

You asked.

LAURA

I just asked, you...answered.

JESS

It's what I was thinking.

(Beat.)

LAURA

Three years ago...

JESS

Yes?

LAURA

Was it...someone in particular?...And did she leave you?

JESS

You knew her -- Emily ---

LAURA

I don't ---

JESS

Well, you did. And yes; she left -- for my sake, of course.

LAURA

That one.

JESS

It's like someone pitching you out a window and telling you the fresh air will do you good.

LAURA

You've used that before.

JESS

Have I?

LAURA

Yes.

JESS.

I use it a lot.

(Pause.)

You and Daniel have a sort-of...dwindling marriage, don't you?

(Pause.)

LAURA

Yes.

JESS

God, I envy you!

LAURA

You're being ridiculous.

JESS

(Heartfelt.)
I am ridiculous!

LAURA

No you're not ---

JESS

Of course I am ---

LAURA

I didn't mean it ---

JESS

Do you really believe it's possible to go around asking your friends if they think you're being pursued by terrorists and not know you're ridiculous? Of course I am. Of course I am...

LAURA

You're in a mood ---

JESS

I am not in a mood, this is me ---!

LAURA

Sh - sh -- calm down.

(Beat.)

JESS

What I said before -- that was asinine. I apologize.

LAURA

You should go home.

JESS

That's the last thing I want to do ---

LAURA

The terrorists are all at JFK; I called Pan-Am ---

JESS

It's not the terrorists. I deserved that, but it's not the...

(Beat.)

I wish you'd paid attention to me when we first knew each other, I was within reason then, honest Injun'...

LAURA

I believe you...

JESS

I should go home.

(Beat.)

Oh God, but home, it's ---

LAURA

Oh ---

JESS

Getting there and...turning on the T.V....ordering in food...watching more T.V....looking for pretty girls to masturbate to -- Oh Jesus, that was ---

LAURA

No, that's ---

JESS

That was crass; I'm sorry -- I'll censor ---

LAURA

It's fine.

(Beat.)

It isn't so bad...home, it's ---

JESS

No...No, it's not so bad.

(Beat.)

Except I never know when to go to sleep.

LAURA

What?

JESS

I'm never tired -- what could possibly make me tired?...And I always start to panic a little when I realize I'm having...another evening without a coda. I hate that feeling, it makes me...take aspirin!...I...

LAURA

(Softly.)

I know.

(Beat.)

JESS

It doesn't even bother me any more that I'm mediocre ---

LAURA

You're not mediocre; you're extremely gifted ---

JESS

Let's...not.

(Beat.)

I know I'll never be first-rate or have any money...but lately I've begun to think that three years ago was it...that this isn't just some sort of big hiatus...what if I've had my share?...And that's the one -- no, let me finish -- that's the one...intolerable idea.

(Beat.)

LAURA

You are talented.

JESS

I'm a clever jewboy, getting older; we come by the bushel-load.

LAURA

No -- I know this -- no matter what you say -- I know it, I do.

(Beat.)

JESS

Thank you.

LAURA

Don't say those things about yourself any more. You think they're just about you, but they hurt me, too...they hurt me.

(Beat.)

And there will be someone...there always is...

JESS

Someone.

(Beat.)

LAURA

Yes.

(Pause.)

Don't envy me.

JESS

What?

LAURA

Don't -- God! It drives me crazy to think you might envy me -- it's insane, it's stupid ---

JESS

I didn't ---

LAURA

Sometimes it's better -- it's better to be alone with your hand -- really ---

JESS

God --

LAURA

And it doesn't have anything to do with not loving someone -- you can love so much -- you can try so hard -- and it's still, it's still grueling just being in a room -- brushing your hair --

JESS

Laura ---

LAURA

I don't want to say anything -- oh, look, don't listen to me, please, please don't listen...

JESS

(Deliberately.)

...I think you're a wonderful woman. And I think lately your life hasn't been worthy of you. And I wish I could change that...I wish I could be allowed to change that.

(Pause.)

I used to say...all the time...I'd say..."Happiness is the compensation of the failed..." Do you believe it? "Happiness is the..." But now, it's the only thing I want. It's the only thing I want...Someone there...just someone there...I would risk a lot for that.

(She rises.)

What are you doing?

LAURA

I'm going ---

JESS

But the bus isn't here yet ---

LAURA

I'll take the subway.

JESS

Laura...

(She kisses him, then turns and starts off.)

JESS

(Again.)
Laura!

(She's gone.)

Fade out
End of scene

ACT ONE, SCENE EIGHT

(DANIEL in his office on phone. JESS enters his apartment to the phone ringing. He picks it up.)

JESS

Hello...

DANIEL

You're in -- hi!

JESS

(This is not the person he wants to talk to.)
Oh -- Daniel -- hi!

DANIEL

I'm so happy I finally caught you ---

JESS

I actually have to be leaving sort-of-now so ---

DANIEL

Oh, then I --

JESS

No, no, that's fine, what?

DANIEL

I was just wondering if you-- I mean, if it would be possible -- and if it's not, I'll --

JESS

Daniel, I really <u>am</u> running late ---

DANIEL

(Overlapped.)
Oh ---

JESS

Why is it you can only manage to finish your sentences in court; don't you think the rest of us are worth the effort? I mean it's really ---

DANIEL

Have I...done something?

(Beat.)

JESS

No, I'm sorry, I'm just ---

DANIEL

Are you...irritated with me about ---

JESS

Not at all; what would you like?

DANIEL

...Can we get together?

(Beat.)

JESS

Sure.

DANIEL

Great.

JESS

(Abruptly.)
Not this week.

DANIEL

Oh...all right...well, whenever...

JESS

"Whenever?" Aren't you too busy for whenever?

DANIEL

I'll make the time.

JESS

Can you do that?

DANIEL

Sure.

JESS

I didn't think you could.

DANIEL

Uh --

JESS

I mean, I thought your time lately was, you know, hard to get hold of ---

DANIEL

What?

JESS

...Nothing. Nothing-nothing; so ---

DANIEL

(Confiding; vulnerable)
I just-- things are not-- oh, Christ, you know, this isn't the place--but things are---

JESS

Sure-sure-sure-sure-sure, I understand...Oh! Listen! By the way! I hear your new case is going great ---

DANIEL

Umm...Is it?

JESS

Yes!...Well....that's the...scuttlebutt---

DANIEL

There's a scuttlebutt---?

JESS

Whatever; the word is...

DANIEL

I just need to talk to you---

JESS

(Overlapped)
---immaterial; we will; listen---

DANIEL

Things are not great and---

JESS

Oh, Christ! Look at the time--- I'm sorry ---

DANIEL

(Overlapping)
Yes, yes, you have to-- go--

JESS

I'm sorry -- I'm sorry, I'm so sorry; call me top of the week---

DANIEL

Yes, I will---

JESS

And please--

DANIEL

You're the only one I can think of to talk to about---

JESS

(Overriding him)
Please be happy about the case going well at least, okay?

(Beat)

DANIEL

...Sure...

JESS

Do you promise? Do you promise me?

DANIEL

(Puzzled, but accepting.)
...All right...okay...all right...

Fade out
End of scene

ACT ONE, SCENE NINE

(An empty apartment. KEITH and LAURA.)

KEITH

...And how are you?

LAURA

And how do you like this place really, in your heart-of-hearts? It's priced to sell.

KEITH

And how are you?

LAURA

...I am.

KEITH

Good start. And how's the book? I hear your boss -- Mr. Waters?

LAURA

Waters, yes.

KEITH

I hear he loves it.

LAURA

(With private knowledge.)
Oh. Yes.

KEITH

What?

LAURA

He told me he was very proud of our criticism list -- the only weakness was in film.

KEITH

Perfect.

LAURA

He attributes this to his own complete lack of interest in the subject. He says he's going to depend more than usual on my expertise.

KEITH

Oh.

LAURA

It's fine, it's...The writing's beautiful, at least, anyone could tell that. And it's film, so it's easy to fake.

(Beat.)

LAURA (Cont'd)

Anyway, the book hasn't been the point in a while.

KEITH

You don't have to say anything if you don't want to.

LAURA

I want to.

(Beat.)

He's a wonderful man...and there are ways in which...to my surprise...

KEITH

...Don't say anything else.

LAURA

And I think he wants to -- I know he wants to ---

KEITH

You shouldn't be telling me this ---

LAURA

Please ---

KEITH

I don't want to hear it ---

LAURA

Please let me.

(Beat.)

He wants to turn it into something.

KEITH

And you don't want to.

LAURA

Of course I want to, but of course I won't!...I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound ardent.

KEITH

That's all right. Why won't you?

LAURA

...What?

KEITH

Why won't you?

(Beat.)

It's just a question.

LAURA
...Because I can't. Because that isn't the way I do things...Because that isn't me.

(Pause.)

KEITH
(With great withheld disapproval.)
Ah...

LAURA
What?

KEITH
Nothing.

LAURA
Obviously something; what?

KEITH
...Do you think it would make you happy?

LAURA
...I don't know.
(Beat.)
Yes.

KEITH
...Ah...

LAURA
What?

KEITH
Nothing.

LAURA
Don't say -- what are you thinking?

KEITH
If I were thinking something I'd say it.
(Beat.)
It's just that -- and please don't get me wrong --- it's just that -- and I'm not saying anything here -- if someone mentions you to me, and I know everything about you when they do, doesn't it mean, in some way you're dead behind your name?

LAURA
...What are you saying?

KEITH

I'm not saying anything; please don't misunderstand: I'm not saying anything --- But you say you can't do a thing because it isn't you and I have to wonder what does that mean?

LAURA

It means that I know who I am...and I have certain values.

KEITH

But do you and do you?

LAURA

What are you getting at?

KEITH

I'm not getting at anything...

(Beat.)

...Only when was this decision made? Was it when you chose a major or something? Did you say, "Comp Lit and Marital Fidelity?"

LAURA

You're saying you think I should ---

KEITH

I'm not saying anything, please don't accuse me of that.

(Beat.)

It just seems to me such a shame, such a pity --it seems like a terribly wrong thing -- to choose who you are so early -- so early in life -- when you have so little evidence of the world -- and then to go on -- cleaving to that idea of yourself -- as everything keeps changing all around you. It seems worse than wrong, it seems evil.

LAURA

Evil?...You can't call it...we don't even really have evil.

KEITH

We should. We should have it; it's there.

(Beat.)

LAURA

You actually think I should ---

KEITH

I don't think anything.

(Beat.)

Only it seems to me, people pick a flag to cling to -- this drives me crazy about people, I really can't stand it --- they pick "Marital Fidelity" -- and the point I'm

KEITH (Cont'd)
trying to make goes so far beyond the particulars of this situation, but let's just say, "Marital Fidelity," let's use that as a for-instance -- You pick "Marital Fidelity," and then you have what? A rotting marriage. A dying marriage. Your flag -- your value -- it's so narrow it leaves you faithful to a corpse. Why? Your husband -- and don't get me wrong, I love Daniel, I really do -- but your husband has been careless with your marriage, he's been somewhere else, doing something else, but you ---

LAURA
Who says that? What makes you think that?

KEITH
They're your very own words, they're the things you've said yourself!

LAURA
I've never said anything like that ---

KEITH
That's exactly what you've said. You don't listen when you speak. I'm the listener. I'm the one who listens. This is what you say...You've slipped your head into this noose of words, this phrase, "A Faithful Wife," and I think -- I can't help thinking -- My God, what a mingy idea that is! What a tiny idea, what a crabbed way of looking at the world. The phrases we choose, the allegiances, the stupid, stifling, craven sentences we live inside -- death sentences, death sentences ---

LAURA
So you're saying I should ---

KEITH
Oh God, how much I'm not saying anything! You accuse me -- stop, stop!...Laura, I love you so much, so much, you're what I love in life...and it just seems to me that happiness -- happiness is such a rare thing -- when have we ever felt it? -- We can check our diaries and list the dates -- that to turn away from happiness -- to turn away from it has to be -- that word again, yes...has to be...evil.

(Pause.)

LAURA
But to choose someone else's happiness over your own?

KEITH
You can't choose someone else's happiness; it's impossible.

LAURA
...But to turn away happiness so as not to cause someone else's unhappiness?

KEITH

Is Daniel happy now?

LAURA

That's not the point.

KEITH

Is Daniel happy now?

LAURA

...No.

KEITH

Are you? Is Jess?

LAURA

No.

KEITH

Isn't the only point -- isn't the only decent point -- to allow as little unhappiness as possible? Isn't the aim -- doesn't it have to be -- an economy of pain?

(Pause.)

LAURA

Yes. Yes.

KEITH

...Well, anyway, it's just a for-instance...I'm sorry, but I really don't like this apartment, either. All the onyx.

(They look at each other.)

Fade out
End of scene

ACT ONE, SCENE TEN

(The same empty apartment. LAURA and JESS.)

LAURA

Do you like it?

JESS

Umm...

LAURA

No.

JESS

I guess it's the sort of place people find attractive.

LAURA

It doesn't seem to be.

JESS

I don't think that fish-faced woman liked me very much.

LAURA

Mrs. Warren.

JESS

Chilly.

LAURA

She was puzzled. I keep bringing Keith around to places -- I think she thinks of me as a sort of apartment pimp ---

JESS

Oh!

LAURA

And a bad one. He's never interested. You hate this place.

JESS

Umm...I guess all the onyx in the bathroom is nice.

LAURA

...Are you...?

JESS

What?

LAURA

You seem...Fidgety.

JESS

No.

(Beat.)

LAURA

Well.

JESS

I keep thinking that fish-faced woman is going to pop in on us ---

LAURA

Does that make you nervous?

JESS

No...I mean...

LAURA

She never does.

JESS

I keep thinking.

LAURA

She never does. She has to be fetched.

JESS

It's a sort of a...weird field trip, though...<u>why</u> are we here?

(Beat.)

LAURA

Do you think it's going to rain?

JESS

Looks that way.

LAURA

I think it's going to rain.

(Beat.)

Daniel didn't come home last night.

JESS

Why not?

LAURA
He was working late and had an early appointment. He said.

JESS
Oh, well then ---

LAURA
He does that all the time now...I'd cooked!--He didn't seem to care...I thought that was sort of...

JESS
Unkind of him?

LAURA
You think so, too.

JESS
No, no, I was just...finishing your thought.
(Beat.)
Quietly unkind.

(LAURA goes to window.)

LAURA
It's starting.

JESS
Does it look bad?

LAURA
It may get bad. We didn't bring umbrellas.
(Beat. Softly, looking out.)
Is it better because it's quiet?

JESS
I was just ---

LAURA
Is it less ---

JESS
You know, I was ---

LAURA
Is it less blamable?

JESS
I was just talking.

LAURA
But such a long time of it...quiet unkindness...disguised as distraction...other things to to...so softly, so sweetly...how can you lay blame?

JESS
Laura ---

LAURA
I don't accuse myself of anything any more; at least I made an effort.
(Beat.)
Keith didn't like this place either.

JESS
He didn't?

LAURA
No. All the onyx.

(Beat.)

JESS
Of course.

LAURA
(Smiling.)
No, it's ---

JESS
I have no taste ---

LAURA
You're ---

JESS
What a dummy...

LAURA
You don't do anything wrong.

(Beat. JESS smiles.)

JESS
...I do like the way the previous tenants have decorated, though, don't you?

LAURA
Oh! -- Absolutely ---

JESS
It's sort of like walking into a home in Japan ---

LAURA
Or Sparta.

JESS
Yes. Exactly...Sort of...clean...

LAURA
Uncluttered...

JESS
Warm and simple, that's what I -- I'd imagine sex must be kind of uncomfortable on these bare wood floors, but otherwise ---

LAURA
(Suddenly.)
We've brought our coats.

(Long pause.)

JESS
Yes.

LAURA
She never pops in -- Mrs. Warren -- she waits for me to return the key -- it's a pattern we've established...She's showing this place exclusively, no one else.

JESS
Why can't I breathe all of a sudden?

LAURA
Your place -- you said it smells like dead insects ---

JESS
It's impossible ---

LAURA
And mine ---

JESS
Oh God, no...

LAURA

(Goes to door, locks it.)
The lock works.
(Chains it.)
So does the chain.

JESS

I really can't breathe...

LAURA

I've been thinking about this a lot...

JESS

So have I...

LAURA

And I've decided...that we don't have anything left to lose.

(JESS takes off his coat, lays it on the floor. She comes to him. They kiss and he pulls her down.)

Fade out.
End of act.

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

(A bench. KEITH and LAURA.)

KEITH

So, gab, gab, gab, but how are you? I feel as if I never see you.

LAURA

Well, I've been--

KEITH

Well, you've been preoccupied.

LAURA

Yes.

KEITH

Lately. Everybody's mentioned it, by the way.

LAURA

They--Who?

KEITH

You know--Peter, Lois, whoever, Randy--your friends; everyone says they never see you anymore; it's a...thing that's said.

LAURA

Well...I've been preoccupied.

KEITH

Of course--it's just, people love you, they miss you--

LAURA

Well, they're my friends, they'll still be there, you know...when my schedule lightens.

KEITH

Oh, of course.
(Beat.)
How is...your schedule...anyway? Has that all been--

LAURA

(Slightly abrupt)
Everything's lovely, yes, thank you.
(Beat.)

KEITH

Ah.

(Beat.)

So you really haven't seen anyone...not at all?

LAURA

No.

KEITH

Huh!

(Beat.)

LAURA

Oh, well, actually, I did run into Paula; that was...

(Dismisses it.)

Well.

KEITH

...What?

LAURA

Oh, no, nothing.

(Beat.)

Have you spoken to her lately?

KEITH

Have I? No, not in ages. Why...was she...peculiar or...?

LAURA

No, no.

(Beat.)

Not really.

(Beat.)

It's just, you know, I hadn't seen her, and you just assume people will be pleasant.

KEITH

Wasn't she pleasant?

LAURA

No, she was fine, I guess, but...in the middle of the street we'd barely said hello, she launched into this...incredible tirade about Ted and his technical writer girlfriend.

KEITH

I thought she'd gotten better about that, but she's still --

LAURA

Oh God -- Medea minus the sense of proportion! On and on about...Ted...and adultery...adulterers --

KEITH

Oh, it must have been horrible for you!

LAURA

For anybody - not just for me.

KEITH

No, of course, but you were the one who was there --

LAURA

Oh, you know, it was just...what it was.

(Beat.)

It's just, I'd somehow never noticed before what a monster she is.

KEITH

(Softly.)

Oh-- well-- I think that's a little harsh--I mean, I'm sure she was going on, but, you know, she had a headache that day and---

LAURA

What?

KEITH

...What?

LAURA

What do you mean she had a headache that day? You haven't spoken to her.

KEITH

No, I mean, she gets headaches and that's when she goes blooey, so I'm sure she had one...

LAURA

...But it isn't just that...I mean, have you even spoken to Ted since the break-up?

KEITH

Um-- Have I? No, I don't think so.

LAURA

Neither have I-- not even once-- neither has anyone so far as I can tell-- I don't even know the technical writer's name!...and it's because of Paula.She does that sort of thing...she can just sort-of...issue a fiat and suddenly something's over. There are people like that, you know.

KEITH

But you have to understand-- and I know what you're saying-- but you have to understand that-- whatever else -- she is in pain.

LAURA

I do understand-- and she's my friend and I love her, but still-- she is a monster a little.

(Beat. Then she starts to smile in a private way.)

If only she knew about me.

KEITH

Oh! She doesn't though?

LAURA

No.

KEITH

Good. Keep it that way.

LAURA

Nobody does, it's private; it's all mine.

(Beat. The smile.)

She'd probably organize a rally against me.

KEITH

When you were with her...no this is stupid.

LAURA

What?

KEITH

When you were with her... and there was no reason to...but did you feel guilty at all?

LAURA

(Seriously.)

Actually, yes.

(The smile.)

KEITH

You're lying.

LAURA

Actually, yes.

KEITH

That's funny...I'd have thought the whole thing would be-- and it would be stupid if it were and I'm thrilled that it's not-- but I thought the whole thing would be somehow, I don't know, crammed with guilt.

LAURA

You'd have thought that?

KEITH

Yes.

LAURA

That's why you write fiction.

KEITH

Really? So there's never any? Never any guilt?

LAURA

No, of course there's some of it all the time, every minute...but there's so much more.

KEITH

Like what?

(Beat. She smiles, can't really answer.)

Well, I didn't mean the <u>whole</u> thing was guilt-ridden, of course, because then what would be the point? But...the whole thing in alternation. I would somehow think -- and how would I know? -- But I'd think it would be the sort of thing where there'd be this...enormous...irregular...excitement...you know that kind of excitement where your heart thuds and you don't know if it's ecstasy or a death alarm?

LAURA

Yes. I know that.

KEITH

For instance -- when you're at Jess's apartment...I've never seen it, I've just heard the terrifying descriptions, but when you're there, I'd imagine a kind of...leading-up quality...a sort of tang to things...what am I talking about?...But I'd imagine the whole <u>first</u> part would be sort of...swirling and wonderful...and the next part, too ---

LAURA

You mean, the sex part ---

KEITH

<u>Your</u> words --

LAURA

The sex part.

KEITH

...But then, these times...these moments...I've always felt were recesses...and after, there's that drop, that..."every animal is sad"...and especially where the context is so...prohibitive...it seems to me that...objects in the room...the baseball cap on his desklamp ---

LAURA

I thought you've never been there ---

KEITH

I haven't, I haven't...but the baseball cap on his desklamp...the woodcarved schooner in the window...and the strange smells the walls have trapped...old cooking...wet dust...paint...Do they begin to close in on you?...I wonder. Does that awful...presentness...of life seem...like a threat...or an accusation...or a sentence?

(Pause.)

LAURA

When you see Catherine, do you ever want to whip out your dick and say, "Munch on my lovepole, slavechild?"

KEITH

Laura ---

LAURA

Is that yes?

KEITH

I can't believe you said that.

LAURA

I thought we were asking personal questions.

KEITH

Your vocabulary has deteriorated ---

LAURA

Maybe so ---

KEITH

I mean ---

LAURA

Well.

(Beat.)

KEITH

Then how are things really?

LAURA

(Sighs.)
Fine.

KEITH

Vivid.

LAURA

I can't be vivid...I feel...quite happy.

KEITH

Go on.

LAURA

No.

KEITH

Laura ---

LAURA

(Almost shyly.)
That sort of thing -- it can't be talked about.

(Pause.)

KEITH

When you were unhappy, I heard every detail ---

LAURA

That was when I was unhappy -- Unhappiness exists to give people something to talk about, you know, on slow news days, that's a different story...oh, listen, what's the difference?

KEITH

I care about you. I want to know how things are with you.

LAURA

I've told you.
(Beat.)
How are things with you?

KEITH

Oh, please --

LAURA

What have you been doing?

KEITH

Not looking at apartments.

LAURA

We will again. Soon. So what have you been doing?

KEITH

Reading books, sitting in parks.

LAURA

No, I mean, really?

KEITH

That's my life. Honest Injun!

LAURA

No, I mean...really.

KEITH

(Almost stern; clipped.)
That's. It.
(Pause.)
This is sort of unfair of you. It's kind of a tease...It's only because I care...In a way you're being a little bit unkind.

LAURA

Then I guess I am a little bit unkind.
(Looks at watch.)
Oh, look at the time! I'm late for a new author -- call me soon.
(Exits.)

Fade out.
End of scene.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

(JESS's bedroom. JESS and LAURA are naked under the bedsheets. After a moment, she shrugs into a wrapper.)

JESS

No.

LAURA

Sorry.

JESS

Take it off. Walk in front of me.

LAURA

(Starts looking under bed for panties.)
Where's my...?

JESS

(Holding her playfully.)
Is it the dead insects?

LAURA

No.
(She leans back, sighs. He licks her neck.)
That will smell on me.

JESS

Ugh! Not charming.

LAURA

Sorry.
(Under the sheet, he shimmies back into his underpants; she watches.)
Middle-age rapture: make a reservation well in advance.

JESS

Not middle-aged -- Christ, we've got another...<u>years</u> before we're middle-aged... and that's conservative ---

LAURA

What then?

JESS

Unfit. Alas.
(He rises, starts looking around for his robe.)

LAURA

Lively, though. Definitely...lively.

JESS

(Finds robe, puts it on.)

Ah-hah!...Now I'm fine.

(He sits on chair. She laughs.)

LAURA

That robe ---

JESS

What --- ?

LAURA

It makes you look like an eskimo or something; it's very ---

JESS

I just thought ---

LAURA

You look like you're wearing a racoon coat or something --

JESS

I just thought this was a helluva lot more erotic than ---

LAURA

Or a babushka --

JESS

-- a helluva lot more erotic than this --

(He flashes her briefly; she laughs; he laughs with her.)

I've reached that depressing point where nudity is chiefly utilitarian, I'm afraid.

(She's still laughing.)

Did you drink too much at lunch? You're acting like an idiot.

(She curls back into the bed.)

You are not going to be fit for an afternoon's work.

LAURA

(Laughing, hugging pillow.)

No ---

JESS

Oh Christ, my luck, a dipso -- I just hope we can deliver you home in some sort of working order ---

LAURA

I had one glass -- I'm not drunk -- I'm giddy --

JESS

I'd hate for Daniel to see...

(Beat.)

Well...

...

(Beat. JESS gets out of the chair, picks up a pile of papers, starts sifting through them.)

LAURA

What's that?

JESS

My students. I was supposed to have these grades in four days ago ---

LAURA

Don't they dock your salary if you do that, or something?

JESS

Probably. I've been a complete delinquent anyway. I keep skipping out on classes.

LAURA

Why?

JESS

...To have carnal knowledge of you, sweetheart.

LAURA

No.

JESS

As we speak, I'm supposed to be showing "Jesus of Nazareth."

LAURA

They'll fire you.

JESS

I'll live on love.

LAURA

You can barely live on money...don't do that any more.

JESS

When will we ---?

LAURA

Please.

JESS

Okay.

(Beat.)

Nobody minds, really. No one wants to see, "Jesus of Nazareth." They get spared a transcendently tedious movie, I get laid, everybody's happy.

LAURA

An economy of pain.

JESS

(Smiles.)

Howells.

(Beat.)

LAURA

What?

JESS

That phrase -- "an economy of pain" -- William Dean Howells. From The Rise of Silas Lapham. It's so strange you know it. Hardly anyone's read The Rise of Silas Lapham. I always liked that part, though: "an economy of pain."

LAURA

I thought it was Keith.

JESS

Keith? No. Keith isn't that good.

LAURA

Keith is very good.

JESS

He's all right.

LAURA

Not "all right"- he's excellent.

JESS

It was a very promising book of short stories, yes.

LAURA

...That's condescending.

JESS

Well, I mean, it's just the fact, isn't it? There really hasn't been anything else, has there?

LAURA

He's in a slump.

JESS

A five, a, what, a six year slump?

LAURA

Others have had worse. I think when Catherine left him --

JESS

Catherine?

LAURA

Don't you know the famous Catherine?

JESS

Oh, yes, right.

LAURA

He sort-of lost his spirit, I think.
(JESS looks at her, smiles, almost incredulous.)
What?

JESS

Listen to you.

LAURA

What?

JESS

What a romantic you are!

LAURA

No, That can happen...Anyway, that isn't the point. The point is he was extremely good.

JESS

...Brilliant.

LAURA

...You're just getting cocky ---

JESS

(Smiling self-satisfiedly.)
Hm-hm-hm---

LAURA

Because old Waters is interested ---

JESS

Interested?

LAURA

-- in publishing your little pieces ---

JESS

My little pieces! My little pieces?!

(He dives onto her, playfully wrestles with her.)

LAURA

Your wonderful little pieces.

JESS

Wonderful little pieces?

LAURA

Your breathtaking, your dazzling, your awesome little pieces.

JESS

...Waters does like them, doesn't he?

LAURA

Very much.

JESS

And he knows something about the subject?

LAURA

...I'm one of the very few decently educated people alive who doesn't.

(JESS smiles with satisfaction. They kiss. He lies beside her, her body cradled in his. They hold this way a moment, then he sees something sticking out of the chair cushion; he starts laughing.)

What?

JESS

You forgot something here last time.

LAURA

I did? What?

JESS

(Goes to chair, pulls panties out.)

These.

LAURA

Did I forget those?

JESS

Yeah.

LAURA

Did I?

JESS

Well, it was a breezeless day.

LAURA

(Holds out hand.)
Give me.

JESS

No.

LAURA

Give.

JESS

I want to keep them. I want to wear them.

LAURA

They won't fit you.

JESS

Yes they will.
(Puts them over his face; like a mask.)
Beautifully.
(He sits in chair, this way, inhaling.)

LAURA

I want to wear them now.

JESS

Why?

LAURA

Today there's a breeze.
(She puts out her hand.)
Come on.
(He takes them off his face, holds them.)
Come on.

JESS

(He looks at her. She is sitting up on a corner of the bed. He crosses to her, kneels beside her, acts like a shoe salesman.)

Left foot, please.

(Beat. She puts her left foot in the leghole.)

Right foot.

(She puts her right foot in the other leghole. He slides the panties up her legs, slowly, then sits beside her he, his hands still inside the garment; they kiss, sort of idly this way for a while. The phone rings.)

JESS

The machine'll pick it up.

(She slides his hands off her, hitches herself back on the bed. He follows. The machine talks.)

MACHINE (KEITH)

Hi, guys! It's me. How <u>are</u> you? I hope you're well. It's a beautiful day, I'm reading Boethius, I hope you're enjoying yourselves. Call me. Oh, wait, I'll see you tonight at Paula's party. Bye.

(Beep off. LAURA rises.)

JESS

Hey!

LAURA

(Distracted.)

Mmm...

JESS

What?

LAURA

(Bunches herself in the chair.)

Don't you find him...lately...

JESS

What?

LAURA

Irritating?

JESS

<u>Lately</u>?

LAURA

There's something in his voice. It's full of...

JESS

Money?

LAURA

Shit.

LAURA (Cont'd)

(Beat.)
No, literally, shit. Constipated.

JESS

Lately?

LAURA

Well...

JESS

...I'm going to drink some more.
(He gets bottle, pours out a glass.)

LAURA

I don't want to talk to him...
(Brought up short by something.)
Is Paula having a party tonight?

JESS

I don't know.

LAURA

Why wasn't I invited?

JESS

Maybe it's just the A-list.

LAURA

I <u>am</u> the A-list.

JESS

What's the difference? She gives lousy parties - you don't want to go, do you?

LAURA

Of course not - but why doesn't she want me there.
(Beat.)
...Guys?

JESS

Huh?

LAURA
He said, "guys." On the message.

JESS
Both of us.

LAURA
Did you tell him I was coming here today?

JESS
...No.

LAURA
Why would he assume we'd listen together?

(Beat.)

JESS
Oh, I don't ---

LAURA
Does he always leave you messages that way?

JESS
...I think this is the first.

LAURA
So he assumed, what, we were here and not answering.

JESS
We are here and not answering.

LAURA
But how did he know?

(Beat.)

JESS
(Mock-creepy.)
Dum-de-dum-dum...

LAURA
No, I mean it ---

JESS
What's the big deal?

LAURA
...He asks these questions ---

JESS

How many orgasms?

LAURA

Has he asked you that?

JESS

Of course not.
(Beat.)
Not directly. I need to grade these papers...
(He picks them up, looks at them.)
Really, forget about it.

LAURA

I'm cranky.
(JESS taps his nose and points his finger at her in rhythm.)
Yes, I know.
(Beat.)
Do you need help?

JESS

Oh, yes, you'd be a marvelous help. The only woman alive who has never seen "Citizen Kane"---

LAURA

Just asking ---

JESS

A woman who thinks "The Magnificent Ambersons" are fire-eaters ---

LAURA

Right, right ---

JESS

Ba-ding-bang-boom.
(He finds his glasses, puts them on, sits in a chair opposite her, starts reading his papers. She just looks at him, very tenderly; after a while he becomes self-conscious.)
What?

LAURA

I love those stupid glasses.

JESS

...These?

LAURA

And I love the way your fingernails are all bitten-up...and I love the mistakes on your body more than the parts that work okay...and I love when, you know, you get a pimple on your neck.

(Beat. He smiles.)

And I don't want to tell him about any of that. It's none of his business.

JESS

I thought you loved Keith.

LAURA

I do love him; he's just not anyone I want to speak to or see right now.

(Beat. JESS sighs.)

JESS

(Picking up wine.)

I'm going to put this away; this stuff'll kill me.

(He re-corks bottle, walks with it, stops, sits sadly on bed.)

Don't do that to me, okay?

LAURA

What?

JESS

Don't love me more than anybody for a little while, then just stop all of a sudden, okay?

LAURA

(Sits beside him; holds him.)

I don't do that.

JESS

(i.e. maybe you do.)

Oh...

(She keeps holding him.)

He's not so bad...You don't think he's so bad, really, do you?

LAURA

It's just a phase...

JESS

I mean, God, really, we should be grateful...if he hadn't told me you were so madly in love with me, we never would have ---

LAURA

What?

JESS
I never would have given you a second ---

LAURA
What did he say? What did he say?

(Pause.)

JESS
That was a mistake...

LAURA
When did he say that?

JESS
Why are you so ---?

LAURA
When did he say that to you? Tell me.

(Pause.)

JESS
A long...a long time ago.
(Beat.)
Before anything...
(Beat.)
Look, it's no big deal.

(Pause.)

LAURA
...I think...I really do want to get back to the office...

JESS
Laura --

LAURA
I need to shower. I need to take a shower.

JESS
What's the matter, why are you ---?

LAURA

(Exiting to bathroom.)
I have to take a shower.

(She's gone. JESS is left alone.)

JESS

Shit.

(He sits on the bed. He sees the panties she wore when she got there on the floor. He picks them up, looks at them, slips them into the pocket of his robe.)

Fade out.
End of scene.

ACT TWO, SCENE THREE

(A restaurant. LAURA and KEITH.)

KEITH

So, how are you?

LAURA

I don't have much time.

KEITH

Oh...You were absolutely right to skip Paula's party; we had a post-mortem lunch about it -- she agrees it was absolutely dreary.

LAURA

Huh.

KEITH

Did you see the paper today? Jess was murdered.

LAURA

I know. On the front page of the Post.

KEITH

That was a rather surreal headline, I thought.

LAURA

It's a fairly common name - someone with it was bound to be killed.

KEITH

You think?

LAURA

Statistically.

KEITH

It made me look twice I tell you. I read it. So Jess had a wife, two children, and a well-placed position in city government? He never told us.

LAURA

Were the fajitas good here, I don't remember.

KEITH

The things you don't know about people. The fajitas...umm...

(JESS enters.)

JESS

Sorry.

KEITH

A lot of calls?

JESS

Mostly condolences. Ha-ha, everyone's so amusing. Who was that guy, why is he so prominent now that he's dead? If my book ever gets published it will be with the name of a famous dead man, that's all I need. Doesn't that sort of thing happen in threes?

KEITH

What?

JESS

People die in threes---

KEITH

People with the same name?

JESS

Yes.

KEITH

No.

JESS

Whatever. It's still incredibly annoying. This restaurant was cited for health violations. 1985, I think.

KEITH

It was?

JESS

I used to read that page. Maybe it was the uptown branch. I don't have very much time.

KEITH

Everybody's rushing.

JESS

Well, this place is pretty remote.

KEITH

Exactly.

(Beat.)

So, what else? Who have you seen? Who have you talked to? It's been forever.

LAURA

How's Catherine?

(Beat.)

KEITH

I don't know. Fine, I guess.

LAURA

Don't you know?

KEITH

No.

LAURA

You don't know?

KEITH

...No.

JESS

Would guacamole be safe?

KEITH

I'm sure it's the uptown branch; I've never had a problem here.

LAURA

You come here often?

KEITH

Yes.

LAURA

With sailors?

KEITH

...What?

LAURA

I mean, it's so remote.

KEITH

Are you all right?

LAURA

I just had a check-up. I won't die of heart, liver, lung, or kidney ailments.
(Looks at menu.)

KEITH

I was just telling Laura I saw Paula the other day. She's lost twenty pounds; she says--

LAURA

I'm having the beef chimichanga and no one can stop me. What were you saying about Catherine?

KEITH

Paula.

LAURA

Why have I never met her?

KEITH

That again? You have ---

LAURA

That's right; I have. Let's have a reunion.

KEITH

Oh God, let's not.

JESS

What were you saying about Paula?

KEITH

Oh, get this, Laura -- Paula's decided it's time she got a boyfriend. She's sitting there, hair flying every which way, her eyes looking too big the way they sometimes do when people lose a lot of weight, her voice pitched in this insane register-- and she's telling me that men are scared off by her intelligence.

JESS

Jesus.

KEITH

I said, "All right, if you say so, what are you having?"

JESS

I think the guacamole.

KEITH

No, that's what I said to Paula.

JESS

Oh!

KEITH

At lunch.

JESS

Oh, oh, yes...

KEITH

We were at lunch the other day. Although the guacamole's an excellent choice; I support you in it.

LAURA

What's her number?

KEITH

...Whose?

LAURA

"Whose?" Who are we talking about?

KEITH

We're talking about Paula; you seem to be having some other conversation.

LAURA

What's Catherine's phone number?

(Beat.)

KEITH

I don't know.

LAURA

...You don't know?

KEITH

She moved recently; it's changed.

LAURA

I see.

KEITH

How's the book coming?

LAURA

Is she listed?

KEITH

I don't know. I don't think so.

LAURA

Well, I'll look it up.

(Beat.)

KEITH

I hope the waiter gets here soon, I don't have much time.

LAURA

Why? What do you have to do?

(Beat.)

KEITH

So, how does it feel to be dead?

JESS

The same, thank you. And you?

LAURA

No, really -- What do you have to do?

KEITH

Maybe it's me, but you seem odd today.

LAURA

No. I don't think so. So...how are you?

KEITH

...Fine.

LAURA

And what else?

KEITH

...Umm...

JESS

Laura---

LAURA

How are you?

JESS

Could we just have a nice lunch in this terrible place and then go?

KEITH

Have I done something?

LAURA

Can I ask you a question?

KEITH

Sure.

LAURA

Do you ever masturbate on the floor and then wipe it up with a towel?

(Beat.)

KEITH

It's like having lunch with Linda Blair.

JESS

I said, let's not go, I don't know why you ---

KEITH

Why did you ask that question?

LAURA

It seems to be a thing men do.

KEITH

It does?

LAURA

I'm taking a poll.

KEITH

(Attempting a witty dismissal.)
I think I may know more about your life than I want to, I mean, please.
(Looks at menu.)
Yes: chicken molé.

LAURA

Here's something I was wondering ---

JESS

Oh God!

LAURA

Did you want to have children with her?

JESS

(In dismay.)
Ohh...

(Pause.)

KEITH

...That's what I'd hoped.

LAURA

Then why is it -- in all the time I've known you -- and you do keep up with each other -- why have I only met her once? Even though I've asked.

KEITH

It's the sort of thing that happens.

LAURA

Here's what I was wondering -- she's blonde, she's articulate, she has a decent job -- She's kind to children and animals -- she broke your heart, but -- does she exist?

(Beat.)

KEITH

...That's...too bizarre.

LAURA

Is there a Catherine? Flesh, blood, cunt?

JESS

Ohh...

LAURA

I want to apologize.

KEITH

...That's...all right.

LAURA

I never paid any attention to you ---

KEITH

Don't be silly ---

LAURA

I've never thought about you...

KEITH

You've --

LAURA

I've never put you together ---

KEITH

You've --

LAURA
You were kind; you were gifted; you were fascinated ---

KEITH
Laura ---

LAURA
I'm an excellent editor --

KEITH
I know that; I'm the first to ---

LAURA
I've been thinking of you ---

KEITH
Umm --

LAURA
I've been thinking of you like an editor ---

KEITH
Whatever that means ---

LAURA
You want to marry, you want to have children; but you see no one; you've seen no one for years -- because of a very deep hurt. There's this very deep hurt, but you're at peace. You read medieval literature in public gardens, you live for your friends. You live for your friends, yet one day you want a woman like Catherine, five babies, a house upstate --

KEITH
I think you can stop now ---

LAURA
But I've been thinking of you; I've put you together; I've collected you --- and, as an editor, I've come to conclude that you are not a plausible character.

KEITH
Laura --

LAURA
I mean, my God! The least we can ask of our friends is that they might logically exist!

JESS
I don't have much appetite, all of a sudden.

LAURA

The thing about people in bed is —

JESS

Okay, look --

LAURA

The thing about people in bed is -- you're a writer, you should know -- they tell secrets.

(Pause. KEITH very still.)

Oh, but, please don't get me wrong -- I'm not saying anything.

Fade out

End of scene.

ACT TWO, SCENE FOUR

(LAURA's bedroom. Bathroom door is slightly open. LAURA, drying herself off after a shower, can be just glimpsed. DANIEL enters.)

DANIEL

Hi!

LAURA

Oh! Hi!

(Automatically she shuts the door. A moment. DANIEL sits on bed, takes off his tie, looks at the closed door. She emerges in a robe.)

There was a draft.

DANIEL

Ah!

LAURA

I just got in. Am I cooking, what?

DANIEL

Ohh...

LAURA

(Sits, combs hair.)

I've had a day...

DANIEL

Then don't cook...

LAURA

That's not what I ---

DANIEL

It makes no difference ---

LAURA

...I'll make something.

DANIEL

I'm not hungry.

(Beat.)

LAURA

Are you...?

DANIEL

...Umm...

LAURA

...whatever?

DANIEL

No. No.

LAURA

Is it the case, is it ---

DANIEL

It's ---

LAURA

---grueling.

DANIEL

No...it's over.

(Beat.)

LAURA

What?

DANIEL

Two days ago.

LAURA

What?

DANIEL

Oh. Right.

LAURA

You could have told me. Did you lose?

DANIEL

No...actually we won.

LAURA

What?

DANIEL

Full damages. It was a miracle.

LAURA

(Slightly peevish.)
Why didn't you tell me?

DANIEL

When?

LAURA

There were...times...I really can't believe you just forgot to mention it, that's ---

DANIEL

Don't -- don't scold me...all right?

LAURA

I don't scold you...

DANIEL

Yes, you do...lately...a lot...For some reason...

LAURA

I don't mean to...

DANIEL

...Oh...

(Beat.)

LAURA

We should finish that bottle of champagne.

DANIEL

Oh, let's not.

LAURA

But --

DANIEL

It's from last Christmas; it's salad dressing. Anyway, it gives me gas.

LAURA

Then I'll ---

DANIEL

Sit. Sit. It's no big deal.

LAURA

But ---

DANIEL

Keep brushing.

(She looks at him, turns back to mirror, brushes. He watches, then stands behind her, works the brush out of her hand, starts brushing for her.)

LAURA

Don't.

DANIEL

I like to.

LAURA

You're -- ouch -- you're snarling. Come on.
(He doesn't yield at first.)
Please.

(He pauses, gives her brush, sits on bed.)

DANIEL

Who did you have lunch with today?

LAURA

Lunch?

DANIEL

I called. You were out.

LAURA

Jess. Is that right? Yes. Jess.

DANIEL

Oh!

LAURA

This book ---

DANIEL

Uh-huh.

LAURA

Non-fiction anthologies --- they're very complicated. Much more than novels.

DANIEL

How's that?

LAURA

Ferreting a...principle of organization ---

DANIEL

Mm-hm --

LAURA

-- out of a disorganized mind.

DANIEL

I had lunch with Jess yesterday.

LAURA

Did you? He didn't tell me.

DANIEL

Yes.

LAURA

How was that?

DANIEL

It was fine...nice...well, until ---

LAURA

What?

DANIEL

We ran into Randy after.

LAURA

Oh!...Was that so terrible?

DANIEL

He was with some girl. Terrible? No -- it was fine at first -- I liked him more than usual. He was describing his latest...painting?

LAURA

Sculpture.

DANIEL

Sculpture is it?

LAURA

Yes.

DANIEL

Yes, I wasn't really...anyway, he completely ignored Jess.

LAURA

Huh!

DANIEL

But he was so...unusually pleasant, otherwise, I didn't even---and the girl with him seemed...I didn't catch her function; they were acting like a couple, whatever that means, but still --

LAURA

Whatever.

DANIEL

But then -- after completely refusing to acknowledge Jess's existence, you know -- Randy turned to him, and without so much as "hello," asked, "So, how's Laura?"

(Pause.)

LAURA

That idiot.

DANIEL

Is that ---?

LAURA

What an idiot.

DANIEL

Is that supposed to be humor?

LAURA

Well, of course that's what that's supposed to be. What did Jess say?

DANIEL

Well, Jess...Jess couldn't care less -- he didn't mention it to you?

LAURA

No.

DANIEL

No. He couldn't care less, he just looked at him cross-eyed and then Randy and the girl went off to have lunch with Keith ---

LAURA

With Keith?

DANIEL

Yes. Oh, right, Keith wants you to call him?

LAURA

He does.

DANIEL

He called me at the office. Haven't you been speaking to him?

LAURA

Not recently. Busy.

DANIEL

Whatever...Why do so many of your friends...?

LAURA

What?

DANIEL

...talk so much?

LAURA

...They're just...idiots, you know.
(Beat.)
I can't believe you didn't tell me you'd won, I can't believe ---

DANIEL

It was in the paper.

LAURA

...What?

DANIEL

Small. Item.
(Beat.)
They really are...idiots...aren't they?

(Beat. LAURA looks at him in mirror, then extends brush to him.)

LAURA

Would you finish this for me?

(DANIEL rises, takes brush, brushes her hair.)

Fade out
End of scene

ACT TWO. SCENE FIVE

(A restaurant. KEITH is at a table; DANIEL enters.)

DANIEL

Hi!...Hi!

KEITH

Hello. Good to see you.

DANIEL

I'm late.

KEITH

Well --

DANIEL

I was with a new...client.

KEITH

You look ---

DANIEL

It was pretty...pretty weird ---

KEITH

I'm sorry ---

DANIEL

No, I'm, I'm, very happy about the case, actually, but he was ---

KEITH

Tough? Insolent?

DANIEL

Not at all.

KEITH

Boorish? Illiterate?

DANIEL

Quite charming, really.

KEITH

Oh!

DANIEL

He told wonderful stories. Salty. Funny. I liked him...a lot, a good deal.

KEITH

Then I don't understand.

DANIEL

Well...he had no nose.

KEITH

Excuse me?

DANIEL

Have you ever seen that?

KEITH

No.

DANIEL

It's strange.

KEITH

I'd ---

DANIEL

Just sort of, these blowholes ---

KEITH

Yikes!

DANIEL

His nose was -- it exploded -- during the war ---

KEITH

The ---

DANIEL

Second World War. He's quite...old, actually. He'd tried suing before. They said he was responsible for the explosion, himself. That he was drunk. Which he wasn't --

KEITH

God...

DANIEL

The Army.

KEITH

I mean...God.

DANIEL
But, there are these...new witnesses that have come forward...after all these ---

KEITH
Great!

DANIEL
Can you imagine?

KEITH
Great. Great, great...

DANIEL
God, this restaurant has a fountain, and I'm a little...

KEITH
Lunch is on me.

DANIEL
Oh, no, that's ---

KEITH
My invitation, my neighborhood, my treat.

DANIEL
That's very ---

KEITH
Forget about it. So. How are you?

DANIEL
Well. You?

KEITH
Oh, always the same. Are you really?

DANIEL
Umm...?

KEITH
No. I just...nothing.

DANIEL
I'm glad we're having this lunch.

KEITH
Well, after talking about it forever...

DANIEL

Exactly. What's good here?

KEITH

Just about everything.

DANIEL

Good. I'm hungry.

KEITH

Are you?

DANIEL

Yes.

KEITH

Huh!

DANIEL

I'm sorry -- is that strange?

KEITH

No, of course not, not at all.

DANIEL

(In menu.)
Chicken Paillard.

KEITH

How's Laura?

DANIEL

Umm...All right, I think; we...I think all right.

KEITH

Hm...

DANIEL

(Decisively.)
Pork loin.
(Looking at KEITH)
What?

KEITH

Can I ask you something?

DANIEL

Yes.

KEITH

It may sound of the wall ---

DANIEL

That's all right ---

KEITH

Are you and Laura still together?

(Pause.)

DANIEL

What do you mean?

KEITH

Oh!...Nothing, nothing. The pork loin is an excellent choice; I support you in it.

DANIEL

(Hesitant.)
No, no, why did you ask that?

KEITH

I shouldn't have asked it.

DANIEL

Why...did you?

(Beat.)

KEITH

...People have said things.

(Beat.)

DANIEL

Who?

KEITH

I'm not saying who.

DANIEL

Please tell me.

KEITH

I can't, I really can't. I wish I could. I wish I could.

DANIEL

Oh.

KEITH
Oh, look, it's just stupid, let's not talk about it. It's just I haven't seen Laura in such a long time and all these people so I worried. I'm sure it's ---

DANIEL
Why haven't you seen her?

(Beat.)

KEITH
She's been busy.

DANIEL
All these people? How many?

KEITH
...I don't know...

DANIEL
How many?

KEITH
I don't know.
(Beat.)
Many.

(Beat.)

DANIEL
Oh...

KEITH
I just really wouldn't trust my friends if I were you...we should order ---

DANIEL
What...do they say?

KEITH
Nothing, they say nothing, stupid things, I didn't mention it. Oh! Jean-Claude has finally moved his things out of Peter's apartment, did you hear?

DANIEL
(Distracted.)
No...

KEITH

Yes. Apparently he and the technical writer-- her name is Jane, by the way-- don't feel comfortable here any more. He claims it's people, but I think he probably just feels guilty. At any rate, they're moving to some town upstate with lots of S's and K's and N's-- not Schenectady, the one that sounds like Schenectady...

DANIEL

The things they've been saying ---

KEITH

Oh, Daniel, please, let's not.

DANIEL

Are they about Laura and Jess?

(Beat.)

KEITH

...They say nothing that bears repeating; you know how these things happen, they---

DANIEL

About Laura and Jess.

KEITH

They say nothing but words -- lies ---

DANIEL

But that's true...

(He leans forward as if hit, putting his palms flat on the table to support him, closing his eyes; to himself, as though realizing it.)

Oh God, that's true.

(Beat.)

KEITH

Daniel -- obviously it's not ---

DANIEL

(Working it through in his head.)

Yes...yes...it fits...

KEITH

I'm not listening ---

DANIEL

Of course...

KEITH

I'm really not listening ---

DANIEL

Please!...Things hadn't been going well...for a while -- I don't know what she told you -- but I'd hoped --

KEITH

It's all lies---

DANIEL

But then...things changed. She started to be...angry...impatient with me...as if I'd done something -- I don't know what she's told you ---

KEITH

Daniel ---

DANIEL

I don't know why! ...I must have done something...

KEITH

Listen ---

DANIEL

I...<u>love</u> her, you know.

(Beat. DANIEL trying to piece it together.)

Why...did she change? It happened just like that...I must have...I must have <u>done</u> something ---

KEITH

Daniel ---

DANIEL

But what have I done? What have I done? What have I done? What have I done?

Fade out

End of scene

ACT TWO, SCENE SIX

(LAURA's and DANIEL's bedroom. Night. LAURA sits up in bed, reading. DANIEL enters, carrying some papers. He is still wearing his working clothes, tie loosened. He pauses in doorway, then enters, takes off his glasses, puts papers down. Sadly, he sits on the edge of the bed, sighs, and starts undressing, methodically, folding all his clothes and putting them on a nearby chair. When he's finally naked, he remains sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at his hands for a long moment. Then, quietly -- almost imperceptibly -- he begins to cry. LAURA looks over to him. At first, it's as if she's stunned. Then she leans over and puts her arms around him. He rests his head against her cheek. She holds him tighter.)

Fade out

End of scene

ACT TWO, SCENE SEVEN

(JESS's bedroom. JESS sits, curled in a chair. After a moment, LAURA enters from bathroom, carrying underwear.)

LAURA

Is that everything?

JESS

Yes.

LAURA

Umm...under the bed?

JESS

You can look.
(She does.)
It's awfully piggy of you to take everything.

LAURA

Nevertheless...
(Retrieves socks from under the bed.)

JESS

They're socks!

LAURA

They're mine.

JESS

Actually, no -- actually they're mine -- you just wore them all the time --- I think this falls into a grey area, I think it might require arbitration, maybe you have squatter's rights or something ---

LAURA

All right ---

JESS

I mean -- God!

LAURA

All right.

(Pause. She looks around the room some more.)

JESS

Please stop.

LAURA

I'll be done in a ---

JESS

Stop before you're done -- it's killing me.

LAURA

I'll just take ---

JESS

Stop! Stop! Stop!

(She stops, sits on the bed.)

Just sit there for a minute, all right?

(Pause. He watches her.)

LAURA

I ran into Paula Ellenbogen yesterday. At the place in the park we used to go because nobody else ever did. She was there with Randy. I'd always thought she hated Randy, didn't you? But from the looks of things they must have become friends. They were laughing, very hard, at something and they didn't see me at first. Then they did...see me...and stopped laughing--together as though they'd planned it. They didn't say anything.

(Almost to herself.)

They didn't...say anything. Finally, I said, "Hello, isn't it a nice day?" "Funny," Paula said, "We were just saying it wasn't." That sort of killed the conversation. No one said anything else for about a year until Randy saved us by piping up: "If we don't hurry, we'll be inexcusably late." "Oh, go," I said, "Christ, don't be inexcusably late-- where are you going, anyway?" "To friends," Paula said. "We're going to see friends." And they nodded and moved on-- neither of them uttering a word until I was well out of earshot, at which point they became quite animated. Talking.

(Pause. She laughs, goes quiet again.)

JESS

They're having the memorial for the guy with my name next week. Did you see the pictures of his wife at the funeral? She was so pretty. And the kids, too. All I could think was there's too much sex here to go to waste. Do you think I should go there and introduce myself? I could say, "You don't know me but I have what I think you might agree is a very interesting idea...."

(Pause. LAURA stands.)

LAURA

I'm shopping around for another editor for the book ---

JESS

To hell with the book ---

LAURA

I'm sure I'll find someone; there seems to be a lot of interest.

JESS

Put the things down. Leave them here. Come back.

LAURA

My coat, please.

(Beat. JESS picks up her coat, holds it open for her, and helps her slide it up her arms, turning it into an embrace.)

JESS

All right, but it happened. I had you. You belonged to me. Whatever else...however it happened...it did happen. It did happen. It did happen.

Fade out
End of scene

ACT TWO, SCENE EIGHT

(LAURA's and DANIEL's kitchen. LAURA is arranging hors d'oeuvre. DANIEL enters with an empty tray.)

DANIEL

Oh! Hi!...These are, they're all finished.

LAURA

Okay, I'm almost done with these. You can bring them out in a second. How is it going out there?

DANIEL

Fairly...

LAURA

Is it ---

DANIEL

Lively.

LAURA

Oh. Well, that's good.

DANIEL

I think they're...happy. Those pastries look good.

LAURA

You can taste if you want.

DANIEL

Delicious. .
(Beat.)
Well...Well.
(Beat.)
Well...

(KEITH enters with an empty coffee pot.)

KEITH

Am I interrupting something?

DANIEL

Not at all.

KEITH

I need more caffeinated. People are downing it like ambrosia. I think you're going to have a very late and very hectic party. Oh good -- another tray of those -- they've been missed ---

LAURA

I'll take them out.

KEITH

Good idea.

(LAURA exits with tray. KEITH makes coffee. DANIEL checks oven.)

DANIEL

There are a couple of more trays going. Thank God! - For thin people, they eat an incredible amount.

KEITH

Don't they though?

DANIEL

I think Paula's new teeth must all be canines. It's incredible, she's ---

KEITH

Ravenous and eating like an animal, I know -- Oh, You won your case!

DANIEL

Oh -- oh -- yes...

KEITH

A victory! Congratulations.

DANIEL

It was this witness who did it. He was living in Sarasota...seventy-five years old. He'd been lying for almost fifty years.

KEITH

God!

DANIEL

There'd been all this...all this pressure on him, he'd been terrorized, really. Finally, he couldn't take it. Implicated everyone. Most of them dead, now, unfortunately.

KEITH

Still he told.

DANIEL

Yes.

KEITH
Guilt and redemption -- the best kind of story.

DANIEL
Yes. But to live like that for so many years. And everyone's so old now. And he still...my client...he still doesn't have a nose...And the children are dead; there's no...changing that...And every day is ...work and the world, ...every day, they're such...devastations ---

KEITH
Daniel...

DANIEL
It's just...it would be nice every now and then to do a job where everything terrible hadn't already happened.
(Beat.)
No. Stupid. Silly. You're right -- a little victory. And they're uncommon enough.

KEITH
And how <u>are</u> you?

DANIEL
I'm...fine.

KEITH
Are you?

DANIEL
...Yes.

KEITH
I just want to be sure.

DANIEL
I know.

KEITH
I care about you, you know.

DANIEL
Yes. I do.

KEITH
(Who has been arranging new hors d'oeuvre tray.)
Done!

DANIEL

I'll take them in.

KEITH

Good, I'll make the coffee.

DANIEL

(He starts out, stops.)
You've been a very good friend.

KEITH

Nonsense.

DANIEL

When I was going crazy...when I had all those stupid ideas...you were so kind...I needed someone then. And you...

KEITH

What?

DANIEL

...listened.

KEITH

I'm just glad you were able to put all that ridiculous stuff out of your head.

DANIEL

Well...

KEITH

I never believed any of it for a second.

DANIEL

I know; that was helpful.

KEITH

...How is Jess, by the way?

(Beat.)

DANIEL

I...wouldn't know.

KEITH

And his book?

DANIEL

It's...I think it's over. It became, I think they call it an orphaned manuscript...But I really don't know anything about it.

KEITH

I'm sorry.

DANIEL

No, that's ---

KEITH

I suppose that's still in some ways tricky for you...

DANIEL

Well...

KEITH

I'd imagine that sort of thing...once in your mind...

DANIEL

It's difficult, yes.

KEITH

...It lodges there.

(Beat.)

DANIEL

It's just...at the end of the day...you want a home to come to...so much.

KEITH

That must be what it's like.

(DANIEL exits. KEITH finds large decanter for the coffee, starts rinsing it out. After a bit, LAURA enters, with empty tray.)

LAURA

Oh!...You're still in here.

KEITH

The coffee.

LAURA

Uh-huh...I have to check to see if that last tray is ready yet -- they're eating like...savages.

(Awkwardly, she crosses to oven, takes out tray, removes it to counter. KEITH takes coffee off burner, begins pouring it into decanter, wipes spills, etcetera. The two of them in uncomfortable silence. Then she looks at him, while he works, impervious to her. A moment.)

LAURA (Cont'd)
...Thank you.

KEITH
Oh God, it's just coffee...

LAURA
Not for that.

KEITH
...Oh. Well...

LAURA
Daniel's much happier not knowing.

KEITH
None of my business.

LAURA
No, but thank you.

KEITH
Not my place.
(Pause. They continue working.)
How is Jess, these days?

LAURA
...I don't know.

KEITH
You don't?

LAURA
I heard he was spending some time upstate.

KEITH
Upstate?

LAURA
With Ted and his girlfriend-- but I really don't know anything about it.

KEITH
And the book?

LAURA
...It doesn't seem to exist.

KEITH

No! I'm sorry, that's too bad...

LAURA

Yes...I'd rather not talk about it.

KEITH

No, no...
(Beat.)
The food's wonderful, Paula's raving ---

LAURA

Is she?

KEITH

I think all her new teeth must be canines the way she's going at it --

LAURA

It's good having her around again.

KEITH

Isn't it? Isn't it fun?

LAURA

And all of them. I've...missed it.

KEITH

So have I. Terribly.

LAURA

Even Randy ---

KEITH

I think his girlfriend's a knockout, don't you?

LAURA

And Daniel...and Paula...Even...all of it, all of them, the whole...thing. I wasn't sure I'd ever...have them again.

KEITH

They just had the wrong idea---

LAURA

I wasn't sure. I never realized how terrible it could be...it must be worse than anything...to lose...what's familiar...

(Pause.)

KEITH
They just had to be given the right idea.

(Beat.)

LAURA
Yes.

KEITH
...Hey, you know what we haven't done in forever? Let's have lunch! And maybe hunt for an apartment after. You still have to find me someplace to live, you know.

LAURA
...Sure.

KEITH
When?

LAURA
...Soon.

KEITH
How about day after tomorrow?

LAURA
...I don't know; my book's at the office ---

KEITH
(Charmingly insistent.)
Oh, come on ---

LAURA
I may have an appointment ---

KEITH
Cancel it ---

LAURA
It may not be the kind I can cancel ---

KEITH
Let's...

LAURA
I don't know if ---

KEITH

Let's.

(Beat.)

LAURA

Day after tomorrow.
(Looks at tray.)
Well. Finished. I'll take these out.
(Starts for door.)

KEITH

Laura, I really do love you. You really are my best friend in the world, you know.

LAURA

Yes. I think that might as well be true.

(She exits. He remains.)

Fade out
End of play